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The Varangians

In God's Holy Fire

Sverrir Jakobsson



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EPIGRAPH

*Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.*

W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium" (1928)

To my daughter Stína Signý, the adornment of her parents

PREFACE

Writing books is only one of many ways a scholar has to communicate with an audience, and not necessarily the most efficient one. Having composed a few articles on the Varangians, I nevertheless felt a need for a larger canvas on which to paint an image of the Varangians which differs so markedly from those usually found in general surveys and textbooks.

As it happens, one of my first publications as a scholar happened to be on a similar topic. It was called: “A Research Survey on Scholarly Works Concerning the Varangians and their Relations with the Byzantine Empire 838–1204”. This was published in June 1994 in a brief volume made by the MA students at the Centre for Medieval Studies at Leeds to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the centre. Another twenty-five years were to pass before I had finished the first draft of the present book in October 2019.

During the writing of my doctoral thesis, on the topic “The World View of Medieval Icelanders 1100–1400”, the Varangians made an unexpected reappearance. I was looking for examples of Icelandic attitudes towards the Great Schism and, to my surprise, I discovered that Medieval Icelanders had little awareness of its existence. I published a brief article on the topic in an Icelandic journal which was read by another Icelandic philosopher Jóhann Páll Árnason. He found this conclusion sufficiently interesting to report it to Jonathan Shepard, one of the greatest authorities on the Medieval Roman/Byzantine Empire. On his urging, I sent a more densely argued article on the topic to the Czech journal *Byzantinoslavica* in 2008. Since then, I have been involved again with the

Varangians, as a sideline from my writings on the political history of Medieval Iceland.

At that time, more than a decade or so ago, I would never have conceived of a book on the topic of the Varangians. I felt that this would be an almost unsurmountable task, as my ideas about the Varangians were a far remove from the ideas then dominant in almost every book or article on the topic, very much shaped by the work done by Sigfús Blöndal and Adolf Stender-Petersen in the early twentieth century. However, in the last decade or so, other scholars have been increasingly challenging those premises, and I feel that it is now possible to write about the Varangians without painstaking explanations of why the image of them delineated by me is so different from that of Blöndal.

As can be inferred from the preceding paragraph, I am indebted to many scholars of the present generation who have been challenging established orthodoxies in the most recent years. I was also fortunate enough to be a part of a research group devoted to revitalizing studies of the relations between Scandinavia and the Medieval Roman Empire, the results of which can be seen in the monograph *Byzantium and the Viking World* (from 2016) and other works. If no man is an island, this is especially true about scholars, and most of the ideas which form the premise of this work are the results of minds other than my own, doing work which I have benefitted from.

The bulk of this book has been written in two research sabbaticals I had from my employer, the University of Iceland, in 2017 and 2019. A month's research leave in Copenhagen was invaluable in reacquainting myself with the voluminous secondary literature on this subject, as well as editions of primary sources not available in the University Library in Reykjavík. In addition, it was an unforgettable experience for my family. This present volume is a part of a research project called Legends of the Eastern Vikings which has been generously funded by the Icelandic Research Fund and is still ongoing.

The text and ideas in this book have been moulded by discussions with many of my colleagues and I have received much assistance in committing them into words. I can only mention the most important contributions. The manuscript has been read by my fellow scholars at the University of Iceland, Þórir Jónsson Hraundal, Daria Segal, and Ármann Jakobsson, Csöte Katona from the Central European University in Budapest, and Roland Scheel from the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen. My research assistants Meghan Anne Korten, Þorsteinn Ö. Vilhjálmsson,

Cassandra Ruiz, Þuríður Ósk Sigurbjörnsdóttir and Arnór Gunnar Gunnarsson have contributed a great deal to my efforts. Finally, I would like to thank my editors at Palgrave, Oliver Dyer, Emily Russell and Joseph Johnson, for encouraging me to write this book in the first place and for pressing me to hand it in for publication instead of getting lost in the many fascinating detours of this history.

Lastly, my inspiration for this work and all others of mine comes from my wife, Æsa Guðrún Bjarnadóttir, and our three children, Jakobína Lóa, Stína Signý and Janus Bjarni. They have provided a welcome distraction from my work and are also the reason why I get up in the morning and manage to do any work at all.

Reykjavík, Iceland

Sverrir Jakobsson

A NOTE ON SPELLING AND TRANSLATION

For a work which is based on sources in numerous languages and alphabets, there are many decisions to be made on how to spell things, which things to translate and/or transliterate, and which not to translate and/or transliterate. Although I have doubtless been inconsistent on many occasions, the general principles are as follow: Arabic names have been Romanized, mostly without the use of diacritical marks. For Greek names I use the system used by the Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium, for East Slavonic names I use the Library of Congress system and for Old Norse names I use a normalized medieval spelling. Titles of medieval works in Greek and Old Slavonic are mostly translated into English or Latin (in such cases as that is customary), whereas I have left Latin and Old Norse titles untranslated, except for a few instances when I felt a translation was called for. Original quotes have been translated, but in the case of Old Norse poetry, I have kept the original along with the (very literal) translation. This was done in order to give my readers some sense of the rhythm of the poems.

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Introduction

The Varangians were an elusive group of people. For a period of three or four centuries they existed and then they were gone, seemingly without a trace. They became a part of the memory of people in various European countries and cultures, a memory that progressively was shaped by the rules and requirements of its own metanarrative. The Varangians did not leave behind any modern institutions and very little material remains can be traced back to them. Their survival was due to their place in a narrative, which can be called the Varangian legend.

The Vikings who ventured East have usually been called Varangians, to differentiate them from their compatriots in the West. This term, however, appears relatively late, and the first Vikings in the East were known as the Rus, a term from which the country name Russia and the ethnonym Russians later evolved. The story of the Varangians has often been traced back to the year 839, although no such term as Varangian had existed at that time. However, another group, called the Rus, is mentioned in written sources from that year on, and the Rus are generally accepted as predecessors of the Varangians, for reasons which will soon be made clear. Both groups are an integral part of the history of Nordic people in the East.

The grand narratives about the Varangians had different versions within different cultures. One of them is the Russian/Ukrainian concerning the foundation of the earliest Rus state but the one which is the main topic of this work is the early medieval evolution of a group of people known as the Rus, its eleventh-century transmutation into the Varangians and the

development of the Old Norse tradition of the Varangian warriors in the service of the Roman emperor.

This story has been told before but in a very different form and for a very different purpose than in the present volume. The seminal work on the subject is *Veringjasaga* by Sigfús Blöndal, published posthumously in 1954 and later translated into English by Benedikt Benedikz as *The Varangians of Byzantium*. The purpose of Sigfús Blöndal was twofold, to introduce to his Icelandic readers the rich history of the Medieval Roman Empire and to establish the facts concerning people either known as Varangians in Old Norse sources or reported as having visited the Medieval Roman Empire, generally known as Byzantium in modern scholarly discourse. He was thus preoccupied with establishing which sagas can be trusted as sources and which of them cannot, but he was also prepared to give more credence to saga evidence than scholars of later times would do.

Currently, 66 years after the publication of this work and 70 years after the death of Sigfús Blöndal, his work is still the standard work on the Varangians for an English-speaking audience. This reflects a certain stagnation in the field of Varangian studies. In the time of Sigfús Blöndal, the focus of scholarship on the Varangians was on the period between 800 and 1200 and the purpose was to examine the facts concerning the origin of the Rus and The Varangians, within a hallowed Rankean paradigm of history “as it actually happened” (wie es eigentlich gewesen). The result of this important and ground-breaking research has been the establishment of a grand narrative which is formed like a mosaic or a quilt, as many heterogeneous pieces are placed together to form a greater whole.

In the course of the twentieth century this picture was enriched and supplemented by archaeological research, which has yielded impressive results, yet without any substantial challenges to its main premises. Numismatic studies on the vast quantities of silver coins related to viking trade unearthed in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia has also made important contributions. Some advances towards a reassessment of this narrative have been made through a more thorough analysis of a large corpus on Arabic sources on the eastfaring Scandinavians (for instance by Þórir Jónsson Hraundal), which had previously either been more or less neglected, or trimmed to fit the narrative governed by the more extensively studied Latin, Greek and Slavonic sources.

In later years, however, there is a certain shift in research on the Varangians with more focus on how to interpret the sources available to us, rather than to squeeze minute factual nuggets out of the material

which might have been missed by earlier generations of scholars. As it turns out, these sources have their own peculiarities and a cultural setting particular to them. If the historiography of the Eastern Vikings was for a long time characterized by emphasis on establishing the murky facts of Rus and Varangian activity in the East, the level of interest has begun to move towards different subjects of research, such as the interaction of different cultures, the formation of identities, and the development of a particular grand narrative concerning the Rus and the Varangians. Among examples of a more recent trend in Varangian historiography only few can be singled out, such as the collected volume *Byzantium and the Viking World*, appearing in 2016, and, especially, the German doctoral thesis *Skandinavien und Byzanz* by Roland Scheel.

The present volume aims to take note of this shift in studies on the Varangians. Its main purpose is to re-examine medieval sources on the Eastern Vikings and to highlight the ongoing “debate” (to use a term made popular in this context by Jan and Aleida Assmann) on the Rus and the Varangians in the medieval period. The aim is to compare and contrast sources emanating from different cultures, such as Byzantium, the Abbasid Caliphate and its successor states, the early kingdoms of the Rus and the high medieval Scandinavian kingdoms, and analyse what significance these sources attached to the Rus and the Varangians in different contexts. These sources will be analysed with regard to the cultural and political context in which they were written and the purpose behind the narrative, always with particular attention to the sections connected to the Rus and the Varangians in these accounts. An important part of this debate on the Rus and the Varangians was the fashioning of identities and how different cultures define themselves in comparison and contrast with the other. This comparison fuels the main research questions of this work, encompassed in the overarching theme on the formation of medieval identities.

A key element to address is the traditional emphasis on narrative history as a historical method which “consist in the investigation of the documents in order to determine what is the true or most plausible story that can be told about the events of which they are evidence”.¹ The interest in the documents themselves is limited to the information which can be gathered from them concerning the events they relate which are to the interest of a particular narrative. However, these pieces of information which have been fitted into the grand narrative of Rus and Varangian history have often been removed from their context within narratives devoted

only coincidentally to the Rus and the Varangians. It is time to re-examine this context and focus on the sources for the history of the Eastern Vikings.

An important element of Rus and Varangian history is the portrayal of Rus and Varangians in Old Icelandic narrative sources, which have been neglected in later years. In Sigfús Blöndal's grand oeuvre on the Varangians, twelfth and thirteenth century Old Norse narratives in which they appear were assessed according to their value as sources for actual events, with some lauded as reliable but many others dismissed as legendary. Their relative devaluation as sources for the history of events has resulted in their disappearance from the grand narrative history of the Eastern Vikings, although with some important exceptions. A new research paradigm is needed to re-integrate the study of these texts into the mainstream of research on the Eastern Vikings, and there is a need of a new emphasis on the continued debate on the "Scandinavian experience" in Byzantium and the Eastern World and the role which the Varangians played within the cultural memory of Medieval Iceland and Norway.

The historiography on the Eastern Vikings has been multiform and varied but the main thrust of it has been a focus on actual historical events and how these might or might not be reflected accurately in the sources. In contrast, very little emphasis has been placed on the narrators of the medieval accounts of the Rus and the Varangians, the context in which these writings took place and the motive behind these narratives. An analysis of medieval sources has to take into account the cultural and political context in which they were written and the purpose behind their narrative, with particular attention to the sections connected to the Rus and the Varangians in these accounts. An important part of this debate on the Rus and the Varangians was the fashioning of identities, and how different cultures defined themselves.

The main research questions of this volume stem from this contrast and belong to an overarching discussion of the formation of medieval identities. Employing a theory of cultural memory defined by Jan Assmann, memory (the contemporized past), culture, and the group (society) will be discussed in connection to each other. According to Assmann, the concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose cultivation serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such collective knowledge of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity. The content of such knowledge varies from culture to culture as well as from epoch to epoch but what is common is that through its

cultural heritage a society becomes visible to itself and to others. Which past becomes evident in that heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society.² Here the intention is to examine the representations of the Rus and Varangians from this angle, as this group was important for the construction of the identity of both Russians and Scandinavians.

An important paradigm of cultural memory is “the concretion of identity” or how a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. The objective manifestations of cultural memory are defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive (“We are this”) or in a negative (“That’s our opposite”) sense. Through such a concretion of identity the constitution of horizons evolves, as the supply of knowledge in the cultural memory is characterized by sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not, that is, between what appertains to oneself and what is foreign. This knowledge is not controlled by epistemological curiosity but rather by a need for identity. The concretion of the identity of the Varangians through their manifestation in the cultural memory in different societies as parts of the Self or the Other will be an important hypothesis. For the Romans and the Arabs, the Rus and the Varangians were the Other but they gradually became parts of a common environment and common experience. For Russians and Scandinavians, they were, on the contrary, a part of Us, but a part that belonged in a distant and legendary past.

A second important characteristic of cultural memory is its capacity to reconstruct. No memory can preserve the past. What remains is only that which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference. Cultural memory relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation. Cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance. An examination of the debate about the Rus and the Varangians will bring to light the potential modes as well as the actual modes of the knowledge about their history in different cultures.

Formation and organization of the shared knowledge about the Eastern Vikings are also important characteristics of the debate. The objectification or crystallization of communicated meaning and collectively shared

knowledge is a prerequisite of its transmission in the culturally institutionalized heritage of a society. This was achieved through emphasis on very few important parts of the Rus/Varangian experience, which could be different within different cultures. The organization of this knowledge includes the institutional buttressing of communication, for example, through formulization of the communicative situation in ceremony and the specialization of the bearers of cultural memory. Cultural memory always depends on a specialized practice, a kind of cultivation. In this context, the role of the narrators will be examined as well as the nature of the works in which information about the Rus/Varangian experience was preserved.

The relation to a normative self-image of the group engenders a clear system of values and differentiations in importance which structure the cultural supply of knowledge and the symbols. The binding character of the knowledge preserved in cultural memory has two aspects: the formative one in its educative, civilizing, and humanizing functions and the normative one in its function of providing rules of conduct. Cultural memory is also reflexive in that it reflects the self-image of the group through a preoccupation with its own social system. The debate on the Rus and the Varangians was also a debate on values and rules of conduct. The aim here is to compare various voices in this debate, from writers who used the Rus as a negative, but also partly admirable, Other,—such as Patriarch Photios in the ninth century and Ibn Fadlan in the tenth century,—to the Icelandic Sagas, in which Varangian knights have become models of religious and chivalric conduct. Throughout this development, the debate on the Rus/Varangian revolved around the prevailing norms and values in the societies within which this debate took place and it also reflected their system of differentiation.

Any narrative on the Varangians has to take the Rus into account. The story of the Varangians begins with the appearance of the Rus in the ninth century and it was only in the eleventh century that the Rus metamorphosed into the Varangians. Like the Varangians, the Rus were not a culturally homogenous group but a combination of many ethnicities which could have varied identities.

Another note on terminology concerns the Medieval Roman Empire, which is commonly known as the Byzantine Empire in Western historical literature. Following Anthony Kaldellis (in *Romanland* and other works) I cannot but reject this anachronistic term as the Byzantine Empire was in no way a separate entity from the earlier Roman Empire. The Roman

Empire did not evolve into a Byzantine Empire; it simply continued its existence. Hence, there was no Byzantine emperor, as the office of the Roman emperor never transmuted into anything else than it had been before. This is acknowledged by most historians and experts in the field, but the weight of tradition continues to compel scholars to use the term Byzantine for what is actually the Roman Empire. As this will never change unless we scholars rebel against this practice I use the terms Roman Empire and Roman emperor throughout this book. Even if this might confuse some readers, I hope that this note will clarify the issue, as I have no wish to further the myths of earlier generation of Western European supremacists.

To sum it up, the history of the Varangians is to a large degree involved with the narrators of Varangian history, the creators of that image of the Varangians which became embedded in the cultural memory of medieval Europeans and that of later generations. They are the reason why the Varangians are still the subject of scholarly and popular excitement. They are the chief subjects of this book on the medieval debate about the Varangians.

NOTES

1. White, "The Question of Narrative", p. 2
2. See Assmann & Czaplicka, „Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”.



Incursion

A VIEW FROM THE WEST—THE ROGUE AMBASSADORS

In the ninth century, the Rus came to the attention of chroniclers and historians, as a previously unknown people. It began with events which are recorded in the *Annales Bertiniani*, one of the continuations of the royal Frankish annals composed during the age of Charlemagne. In 839, according to the chronicle, a strange episode occurred, one which has puzzled latter-day historians. The event, described later, involved the emperor of the Franks, the Roman emperor in Constantinople, the Vikings and even the Khazars, that is to say, most of the prominent political actors of that time. Its significance is undisputable, even if its interpretation is not.

In 839 the two most powerful men in the Christian world were Theophilos, the Roman emperor, and Louis the Pious, the ruler of the Franks. The former governed the remnants of the Roman Empire from its capital of Constantinople. He was an educated man with an artistic temperament, and also a man of strong theological convictions who was later vilified as a champion of the iconoclastic heresy. Furthermore, Theophilos was a dynamic warlord who personally had led his army in several wars against the Abbasid Caliphate. His reign saw the fortunes of the Roman Empire rise after two terrible centuries; it had been a long slump in the face of the emerging forces of Islam, followed by an even longer period of entrenchment. The recurring wars against the Caliphate occupied much of Theophilos' time. He was also preoccupied with events in the Balkans,

where a newly founded Serbian client-state of the emperor had been challenging the hegemony of the Danube Bulgarians, who were the established rivals of the Roman Empire in that region.¹

During this lengthy time of trouble, successive emperors had become adept in international diplomacy, making alliances with the enemies of their own enemies. One such long-standing ally was the Khazars, a Turkic tribe which had dominated the steppe between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea since the seventh century. Thus, sometime around 839, Theophilos sent his engineers to aid the Khazars in the construction of a large fortress, known as Sarkel (“the white tower”) on the Don River.² At this location the Khazars could control the portage route from the Don to the Volga River, indicating the increasing importance of those waterways at this time.

The other powerful man was Louis the Pious. He was the son and successor of one of the most illustrious kings in history, Charlemagne, the King of the Franks, and, as such, was also a pretender to the imperial throne, as his father had been crowned emperor by the pope on Christmas Day of 800. Louis was made co-emperor with his father in 813 and succeeded him as the ruler of the Carolingian Empire on his death a year later. His reign was far from peaceful, as several of his sons had rebelled against his rule and a crisis had engulfed the Kingdom of the Franks. Louis also had to contend with Viking attacks in Frisia, which were partly encouraged by one of his recalcitrant sons, Lotharius. At this time, he was preoccupied with the interconnected threats of his own sons and of the Vikings in Frisia.

Although both of these Christian kings were undoubtedly mighty lords, neither was as influential as the uncontested leader of the Islamic oecumene, the Caliph in Baghdad. Therefore, the two emperors were compelled to maintain a kind of partnership, an alliance of the second best, so to speak. Although the coronation of the Frankish king as emperor had contributed to tension between the Carolingian and the Roman Empires, they nevertheless continued their diplomatic relationship and there were regular missions between these two great powers in the first decades of the ninth century. During the reign of Louis the Pious, the appearance of envoys from the Roman Empire in his kingdom are recorded in 814, 817, 824, 827, and 833.³ The last mission was sent by Emperor Theophilos, who clearly wished to be on good terms with the Carolingian emperor.

In 839, the arrival of two such envoys from Theophilos at the palace of the Carolingian emperor in Ingelheim on the Rhine is noted in the *Annales*

Bertiniani. What was unusual, in this instance, is that they did not come alone, as narrated in the annals:

He also sent with the envoys some men who said they—meaning their whole people—were called *Rhos* and had been sent to him by their king whose name was *chacanus*, for the sake of friendship, so they claimed. Theophilus requested in his letter that the Emperor in his goodness might grant them safe conduct to travel through his empire and any help of practical assistance they needed to return home, for the route by which they reached Constantinople had taken them through barbarous tribes that were very fierce and savage and Theophilus did not wish them to return that way, in case some disaster befell them.

When the Emperor investigated more closely the reason for their coming here, he discovered that they belonged to the people of Swedes [Lat. *Suenones*]. He suspected that they had really been sent as spies to this kingdom of ours rather than as seekers of our friendship, so he decided to keep them with him until he could find out for certain whether or not they had come in good faith. He lost no time in sending a letter to Theophilus through the same envoys to tell him all this, and to add that he had received them willingly for the sake of his friendship for Theophilus and that if they were found to be genuine, he would supply them with means to return to their own fatherland without any risk of danger and send them home with every assistance, but if not, he would send them with envoys of ours back to Theophilus for him to deal with as he might think fit.⁴

It seems clear from the annal that Louis the Pious regarded the companions of the envoys sent by Theophilus with the utmost suspicion. His distrust did not diminish when he discovered their true identity.

The Swedes are also recorded in other sources from the Carolingian period, most notably the *Life of Charlemagne* (*Vita Karoli Magni*) of Einhard, where “the Danes and Swedes, whom we call Normans” are listed among the peoples inhabiting the Baltic coast.⁵ The most extensive description of the Swedes, which originated in a ninth century Carolingian milieu, is the *Vita Anskarii* of Rimbert, written in the 870s. It describes the travels of the missionary Ansgar to Uppsala in the 830s, including his visit to the Swedish king, Bern (ON. Björn), which resulted in another bishop being appointed to serve among the Swedes, named Gautbert.⁶ It is thus very likely that Louis and his advisers were able to correctly identify the rogue ambassadors as Swedes, who were probably connected to the Kingdom of Uppsala.

Approximately the same time as the mission mentioned in *Annales Bertiniani* there was a crisis in the Swedish Kingdom and it resulted in King Anoundus (ON. Önundr) being exiled to Denmark. As king he controlled the port of Birka which had connections with the trading towns of the East. In *Vita Anskarii*, Anoundus' attempts to regain his kingdom through his alliance with the Danes are mentioned and described in the following manner:

About the same time, it happened that a certain Swedish king named Anoundus had been driven from his kingdom, and was an exile amongst the Danes. Desiring to regain what had once been his kingdom, he sought aid of them and promised that if they would follow him they would be able to secure much treasure. He offered them Birka, the town already mentioned, because it contained many rich merchants, and a large amount of goods and money.⁷

According to this account, Anoundus “became reconciled” with the Swedes; furthermore, it is stated that these events occurred at the same time as the death of King Louis the Pious in 840 and the subsequent division of the kingdom between his three sons in 843.⁸ Thus, Anoundus probably went into exile a few years before the mission to Ingelheim took place.

It is therefore likely that King Louis the Pious would have been acquainted with the Swedes and somewhat familiar with the political situation in their lands at the time of the mission to Ingelheim. Other information found in the description of the mission to Ingelheim in *Annales Bertiniani* are more enigmatic, such as the name or title of the leader of these Swedish Rus. An argument can be made that the chacanus in question is a personal name of the leader of the men in question, for instance, the Old Norse name Hákon.⁹ An even stronger case could be made for the term referring to the Turkic title *khagan*, which signified a king and was sometimes used for princes of the Rus in later times.¹⁰ This argument has the advantage that it connects the Rus with the lands north of the Black Sea, at that time controlled by Turkic peoples such as the Khazars, who were led by rulers known as khagans.

The term Rus, used in an unmistakably Greek form (*Rbos*) in the *Annales Bertiniani*, is not mentioned in any older sources, although a reference is made to Rus raids in Asia Minor in the hagiographic biography of George of Amastris, a Paphlagonian saint who died in the early

ninth century.¹¹ His biography dates from either the ninth or the tenth century, and might thus be an even earlier source than the *Annales Bertiniani*. The use of the term Rus then becomes more frequent in Greek texts and had probably been used colloquially for an indeterminate period of time prior to the arrival of the Swedish Rus to Ingelheim.

In the *Annales Bertiniani*, it is claimed that the Rus had travelled to Constantinople through inhospitable lands and were seeking to return to their homelands by an easier route through lands subject to the Frankish king. Nothing is related about whether they were ultimately successful in their appeal to Louis the Pious for assistance in this matter. What is not clear from the text is through which lands they had travelled to get to Constantinople, and to which homelands they were planning to return. Their relationship with the Roman emperor and the reason why he had chosen to facilitate their return home is also an enigma.

A possible explanation might be that Emperor Theophilos was trying to recruit the Rus as potential strategic allies against the Abbasid Caliphate. He might have regarded them in the same way that the Roman Empire had long viewed the Khazars. The emergence of a new troublesome neighbour near the Arabs would have seemed a fortunate occurrence to the emperor. This explanation depends on the nature of the Rus in terms of political and a social organization and the location of their homeland. To determine this, we must turn to other sources beyond the *Annales Bertiniani*.

A VIEW FROM THE EAST: THE FUR TRADERS

Abu'l-Qasim Ubaydallah ibn Abdallah ibn Khurradadhbih was the author of the earliest surviving book in Arabic of administrative geography, *The Book of Roads and Kingdoms* (*Kitāb al Masālik w'al Mamālik*), which was written shortly before 850. This is the earliest Arabic text which mentions a people known as ar-Rus.

Ibn Khurradadhbih was an Abbasid official of Persian origin who served for a long time as the Director of the Posts and Intelligence in the province of Jibal in North-western Iran. *The Book of Roads and Kingdoms* is a geographical description of the lands of the Caliphate and the surrounding countries which owes little to earlier Greek works. This book makes use of Persian administrative terms, gives considerable weight to Pre-Islamic Iranian history, and refers to the native Iranian cosmological system of the world in neutral terms. It would seem that Iranian sources are

at the heart of the work and that the position of Ibn Khurradadhbih was that of a Persian convert to Islam.

The section devoted to the people known as ar-Rus is exceedingly brief. According to Ibn Khurradadhbih, the Rus were:

...a tribe from among the *as-Saqaliba* [the Slavs]. They bring furs of beavers and of black foxes and swords from the most distant parts of the *Saqaliba* [land] to the sea of Rum, [where] the ruler of *ar-Rum* levies tithes on them. If they want, they travel on the Itil, the river of the *as-Saqaliba* and pass through Khamlij, main town of the Khazars, [where] the ruler of it levies tithes on them. Then they arrive at the Sea of Gurjan [the Caspian Sea] and they land on whatever part of the shore which they choose. ... On occasion they bring their merchandise on camels from [the town of] Gurjan to Baghdad [where] *as-Saqaliba* eunuchs serve them as interpreters. They claim to be Christians and pay [only] head tax.¹²

The word *as-Saqaliba* was later used to distinguish between Scandinavians and Slavs in the East, but this does not seem to have been the practice in the time of Ibn Khurradadhbih. It can be assumed that the term was not only used to depict Slavs, but that it could refer to all people of fair complexion and hair. In this context, it might refer to all inhabitants of Eastern Europe in a very general way. However, one cannot assume that such terms would have been wholly used consistently or accurately. It was probably not a priority for Ibn Khurradadhbih to distinguish between different types of the aforementioned people, but nevertheless he seems to have regarded the ar-Rus as a distinct group that belonged to the greater entity of the *as-Saqaliba*.¹³

In this description, the ruler of ar-Rum (the Romans) can only be the Emperor in Constantinople. The text of Ibn Khurradadhbih thus confirms that there existed a relationship between the people known as Rhos/ar-Rus and the Roman Empire, with a point of interconnection of the Sea of Rum (the Black Sea, in this instance). There is also a reference to a relationship between the Rus and the Khazars, perhaps concentrating more on the Caspian Sea where the town of Itil was situated along the Volga Delta. This important town is probably the Khamlij mentioned by Ibn Khurradadhbih, the name of which might be an Arabicized version of the Turkic word *khaganbaligh*, or “city of the Khagan”.

However, the ar-Rus only appear as traders in this context and no mention is made of a ruler or a state structure. There is no mention of boats or

of rivers which the Rus might have used to reach the Black Sea. On the other hand, it is clear that they would have had a long journey “from the most distant parts of the Saqaliba”, which might be construed to mean the edge of the world inhabited by Slavic peoples. In the eighth and ninth centuries that boundary was along the river Volkhov, between the lakes of Ladoga and Ilmen.

There are some elements of this description that seem hard to reconcile with western descriptions of Scandinavians. The most important enigma is the statement that the ar-Rus claim to be Christians. However, Ibn Khurradadhbih relates this with some scepticism, as he realizes that this claim is essential for them to be able to gain the freedom of trade within the Abbasid Caliphate. One can thus hardly use this source to support the view that Ansgar’s mission had already gained converts among Swedish merchants who had travelled from Birka to the Abbasid Caliphate. It is more likely that the Swedes who were partly Christianized by Ansgar already had some experience of interacting with Christian and Islamic powers, and could assume a Christian identity if and when they felt this was to their advantage.

What was the connection between the fur traders described by Ibn Khurradadhbih around 850 and the envoys sent by the Emperor Theophilos to Louis the Pious a decade earlier? From whence had they appeared, at the borders of the Roman Empire and the Abbasid Caliphate? Where were “the most distant parts of the Saqaliba” situated? As no contemporary textual evidence is available to provide the answer to these questions, we must turn to the evidence of material remains.

SCANDINAVIANS ON THE MOVE

In traditional historiography, the Viking Age begins abruptly with the infamous raid on Lindisfarne in 793, which was followed by decades of relentless attacks on the British Isles and Western Europe. This is the view of Western clerical chroniclers which has often been repeated in accounts of the Viking Age. Despite this common view, the Viking Age may not have begun with a such an explosion of violence. When the archaeological evidence is examined, the origin of Scandinavian activity appears to have been more modest and seemingly more connected with trade than raids. The fearsome warlords mentioned in the western chronicles were not trail-blazers, but followers of merchants who preceded them by almost a half century.

The Nordic people are a cultural group defined by their closely related languages, which were often regarded as a single common language in mediaeval times, known at that time as the “Danish tongue” (ON. *dönsk tunga*) or “Nordic” (ON. *norræna*). Their native homelands were in Scandinavia, roughly corresponding to the modern kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In the eighth century, they began a process of expansion which led them to establish settlements in the North Atlantic in the West and to the forestlands of Northern Russia in the East. This was the beginning of a period often known as the Viking Age.

There seems to have been a turning point around the middle of the eighth century with the foundation of several trading posts around the Baltic, of whom the most notable are Hedeby, Birka, and Staraja Ladoga. These trading posts were modest in size and population, but their foundation established networks between different parts of the Baltic world. The first two towns were in lands that later evolved into the kingdoms of the Danes and of the Swedes, whereas Staraja Ladoga is the earliest settlement that can be connected with the Rus. The earliest traces of settlement in Staraja Ladoga date from the 750s and it seems that the town was a transit point for the import of Baltic amber and Arabic silver dirhams into Scandinavian lands.

Conditions seem to have been favourable for the establishment of Staraja Ladoga at the inflow of the little river Ladozhka into the Volkhov, 13 kilometers south of Lake Ladoga. The area was thinly populated and the town does not seem to have needed heavy fortifications. This settlement was later known by Scandinavians as Aldeigjuborg (from Finnish *alode-joki*, “lower river”), which might be an older, local toponym. In the beginning, trade with the local Fenno-Ugric and Baltic tribes would have been the main impetus for the founding of Staraja Ladoga.

Lake Ladoga was located at the intersection of the North, the habitat of fur-bearing animals with the coats of finest quality, and the waterways leading to the south, the homelands of the Khazars, the Romans, and the Arabs. Hoards of Arabic silver discovered at the site demonstrate that trade soon became directed towards the Caliphate, probably through intermediaries such as the Khazars (Fig. 1).¹⁴

A runic stone in Kälvestens kyrka in Östergötland, dated to about 800, commemorates a certain Avint (ON. Eyvindr) who “fell in the East”.¹⁵ It is thus possibly the oldest written source for the travels of Swedes in the East and can be used as tentative evidence for connections between Swedes



Fig. 1 The waterways from Scandinavia to Constantinople

and the settlements in the East, even if we do not know whether Eyvindr was killed in Staraia Ladoga or at some other settlement.

Farther up the Volkhov, close to Lake Ilmen, there was a settlement that in later times has been called Riurikovo Gorodishche, which seems to have been settled by Scandinavians sometime in the ninth century. This site is not far from the later settlement at Novgorod and may have been the earlier site of the town known as Hólmgarðr in Old Norse sources. Riurikovo Gorodishche could have the seat of the chakanus who sent emissaries to the Roman emperor, but, alternatively, they also could have come from a more remote location, such as Staraia Ladoga, or even Birka.

A copper coin of emperor Theophilos has been found at Gorodishche, although that does not in itself constitute proof of connection between the town and the Roman Empire as early as 839. More importantly, a seal has been discovered there which belonged to an early ninth century Roman *domestikos* named Leo (or Leon), the commander of the first, second, and fourth unit of the emperor's regiments of guard, which is a stronger indication of diplomatic contact in that period.¹⁶

There are no indications of Scandinavian settlement further south at this point in the early ninth century. The distant lands inhabited by the ar-Rus, according to Ibn Khurradadhbih, thus might well have been these few settlements along the Volkhov, between Lakes Ladoga and Ilmen. The lands between the Ilmen and the Black Sea, which the Rus would have had to pass through to get to Constantinople, were far and wide and, from the perspective of the Roman Empire, might very well have been considered to be inhabited by "barbarous tribes that were very fierce and savage", such as the Magyars, who were located there at the time.¹⁷ What would have compelled the Rus to cross these lands is another question, to which we now turn.

THE NETWORKS OF THE RUS

Before 850, the Rus appear in two contexts in written sources: as traders from a distant land with connections to both the Roman Empire and the Khazar Khaganate, and as part of an imperial mission to the Carolingian emperor. There is no reason to regard the Rus as a coherent polity at this time, they could have belonged to various groups with hybrid identities. However, the sudden emergence of the Rus in Greek, Latin, and Arabic sources within such a relatively short period of time, around 850, is an indication that their visibility was increasing. The activities of the Rus were either growing in scope or becoming more pertinent to the strong and civilized states to the south.

The relationship between Emperor Theophilos and the Rus can not only be connected to his alliance with the Khazars, but also to the trade activities of Rus merchants on the Black Sea, which are mentioned by Ibn Khurradadhbih. It is clear that, in the eyes of the Roman emperor, the Rus did not constitute a threat. However, he must have had more weighty reasons for sending them north through the Carolingian Empire, probably of a political nature. The only contemporary event that we know of, which could be of importance in this respect, is the deposition of King

Anoundus of Uppsala a few years earlier. It is possible that emissaries from the Rus in Staraja Ladoga or Rjurikovo Gorodishche had connections to Anoundus and were seeking him out in his new haven in Denmark. For such a visit a journey through the Carolingian Empire would be reasonable, but the Rus would not have needed to take the same route a few years earlier. This is only a hypothesis, yet one which fits with the few known facts about Scandinavian politics at this time.

There actually seems to have been diplomatic contact between the Roman Empire and Denmark at this time, as seals of the patrician Theodosios Babutzikos, known as an ambassador of Emperor Theophilos, have been discovered at three sites in Denmark, in Hedeby, Ribe, and Tissø. Such seals could only have accompanied an official letter, although one can only speculate as to the intended recipient. What is certain, however, is that at this time the Emperor in Constantinople had sent a series of embassies to Western rulers, to the Umayyad caliph in Spain, to various Carolingian rulers, and one to Venice in 840, which was headed by none other than Theodosios Babutzikos. Whereas the existence of seals is a clear indication of diplomatic contact, the existence of a silver coin of Emperor Theophilos in Birka, preserved as a part of a necklace, does not in itself prove that the Rus who visited Ingelheim were finally able to reach Birka.¹⁸

As far as we know, Louis the Pious did not have many reasons to distrust the Swedes in Uppsala. He would have been far more sceptical of Swedes located at the Danish court, such as King Anoundus. The Danes had often raided the Carolingian Empire and such raids were particularly frequent in the few years before 839. Louis the Pious thus had good reason to be distrustful of the Danes in general.

No further mention is made of the Rus as allies of Theophilos or of any other ninth century Roman emperor. However, Ibn Khurradadhbih's evidence demonstrates that by 850 regular trade relations had been established between the Rus and the Roman Empire, probably on the northern shore of the Black Sea. The Rus had a similar relationship with the Khazars and the Abbasid Caliphate. In the first two instances, in their dealings with the Romans and the Khazars, the Rus paid a tithe for trading privileges, but in the caliphate they received privileges reserved for Christian traders. This indicates that the Rus were generally regarded as valuable trading partners.

Whereas Ibn Khurradadhbih relates that the Rus were exporters of rare items such as swords and furs, no written source offers any information about the trade items the Rus received in exchange for their products.

However, the influx of silver dirhams to the Baltic region seems to have its origin in this period, the last two decades of the eighth century, and some of the oldest silver hoards have actually been discovered in Staraia Ladoga. This increase in trade followed in the wake of a political rapprochement between the Abbasid Caliphate and the Khazar Khaganate, which was the precondition for such trade. The chief routes for this commerce ran from the Abbasid heartlands, Iraq and Iran, via the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus region through the khaganate and then through the Don-Donets basin northwards. In the early ninth century, the Rus would have been very dependent on good relations with the stronger powers on the Pontic-Caspian steppe in order to be able to move their goods to the Black and the Caspian Seas.

Even if the Scandinavian colonies at Staraia Ladoga and Rjurikovo Gorodishche had not been founded for the sole purpose of conducting trade with the Roman Empire, the Khazars, and the Abbasid Caliphate, it soon became one of their most important activities. It seems that the export of furs and other such items obtained in the northern regions soon became directed at the southern regions where they could be exchanged for silver dirhams and other valuable items.

As in the West, the first Nordic settlers of the East were primarily interested in trade. By 850, they did not hold the distinct reputation of fearsome warriors and pirates. However, this was about to change, as a brutal attack was being planned by the Rus, which would have similar repercussions as the Viking attack on Lindisfarne.

NOTES

1. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, p. 232.
2. *Theophanes Continuatus*, pp. 122–24; Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, pp. 182, 184.
3. *Quellen zur karolingischen Reichsgeschichte* I p. 104, 110, 138, 150, II. 20.
4. *Quellen zur karolingischen Reichsgeschichte* II, 42, 44.
5. *Quellen zur karolingischen Reichsgeschichte* I, 180.
6. See *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, pp. 38, 40, 42.
7. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, pp. 58.
8. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, pp. 60, 62, 64, 68, 70.

9. See Garipzanov, “The Annals of St. Bertin (839) and Chacanus of the Rhos”.
10. See f. inst. Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, pp. 31–41.
11. *The Life of St. George of Amastris*, pp. 66–71.
12. Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-masalik wa-al-mamalik*, pp. 115–16; transl. Duczko, *Viking Rus*, p. 22.
13. See Pórir Jónsson Hraundal, *The Rus in Arabic Sources*, pp. 64–65.
14. See Duczko, *Viking Rus*, pp. 64–70.
15. “sa fioll austr”; *Sveriges runinskrifter 2: Östergötlands runinskrifter*, pp. 5–8.
16. See Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of the Rus*, pp. 33–36; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, pp. 99–105.
17. See Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 327–29.
18. See Shepard, “The Rhos guests of Louis the Pious”; Duczko, *Viking Rus*, pp. 56–59.



Attack

A DREADFUL BOLT OUT OF THE FARTHEST NORTH

The attack came suddenly and unexpectedly in the mid-June 860. An unknown northern tribe attacked the most holy city of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. It had not experienced such an onslaught in many decades, let alone from a people which had hitherto played an insignificant role within the perspective of the Roman elite.

In a rare contemporary source, a sermon delivered soon after the attack, Patriarch Photios of Constantinople spoke of a “dreadful bolt fallen on us out of the farthest North”, and a “thick, sudden hail-storm of barbarians burst forth”.¹ The patriarch was shocked, as Constantinople had not been the victim of a barbarian attack since the forces of the Caliphate had been repulsed in 718. At that time, the enemy was well known and had been feared for a long time. This time the inhabitants of the holiest of cities were dealing with an unknown enemy.

The weather metaphors signify the unpredictability of such an attack on Constantinople, but also the patriarch’s wonder at the identity of the perpetrators, as he describes them, with a reference to the Old Testament: “[A] people has crept down from the north, as if it were attacking another Jerusalem, and nations have been stirred up from the end of the earth, holding bow and spear; the people is fierce and has no mercy; its voice is as the roaring sea”.² The patriarch’s language indicates that he regarded the attackers as a cruel, marginal, and primitive people. He laments that “the

unbelievable course of the barbarians did not give rumour time to announce it, so that some means of safety could be devised, but the sight accompanied the report, and that despite the distance, and the fact that the invaders were sundered off from us by so many lands and kingdoms, by navigable rivers and harbourless seas".³ Photios makes both these points repeatedly, that the attack was unexpected and that the attackers were from lands very far from the empire, lands situated at the end of the Earth. The terror associated with these attacks stemmed partly from these two reasons. It was the terror of the unknown, of a mysterious enemy that had suddenly revealed himself. The tenor of the language is similar to the descriptions of the Viking attack on Lindisfarne, almost seven decades before.⁴

In a second sermon delivered shortly after the first, also in the summer of 860, Photios discussed the identity of the barbarians in more detail. He again returns to the theme that the invading nation "was obscure, insignificant, and not even known until the incursion against us" and calls it:

a nation of no account, nation ranked among slaves, unknown, but which has won a name from the expedition against us, insignificant, but now become famous, humble and destitute, but now risen to a splendid height and immense wealth, a nation dwelling somewhere far from our country, barbarous, nomadic, armed with arrogance, unwatched, unchallenged, leaderless, has so suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, like a wave of the sea, poured over our frontiers, and as a wild boar has devoured the inhabitants of the land like grass, or straw, or a crop.⁵

It is clear that the patriarch's wonder is less marked and that he now feels comfortable in making such a statement about these barbarians from safe distance, whom he depicts as nomadic and leaderless. Yet they are no more than an unidentified "Scythian tribe" in his work. This is a reflection of the literary style of Photios, rather than any lack of knowledge on his part, as peoples inhabiting lands north of the Danube area and the Black Sea were often designed by this classical ethnonym by Roman authors. In the same manner, non-Romans were often designated as "barbarians", as non-Greek speaking peoples had been done in Classical Antiquity. In an encyclical letter composed some years later, Photios had another name for those boar-like barbarians. They were called the Rus.⁶

The patriarch Photios was one of the most learned men of his age, and left for posterity an impressive account of his literary knowledge, in the *Bibliotheca* or *Myriobiblos*, a collection of extracts and abridgements of 280 classical works, the originals of which are now, to a great extent, lost. It

seems that Photios had a special interest in the past, as the work is especially rich in extracts from historical writers. This offers ample proof of the erudition of Photios, who until his elevation to the patriarchy had followed a secular career path, becoming chief imperial secretary (Gr. πρωτασηκρήτις) to the regent Theodora, widow of Emperor Theophilos. They actually belonged to the same family, as Photios' brother Sergios was married to Irene, a sister of the Empress Theodora. Photios had been made a patriarch in 858 by Caesar Bardas, the brother of Theodora, who had usurped the regency in a palace coup. Photios had held no clerical office before this time. Because he had worked in the imperial secretariat, it is likely that Photios had known about the Rus that had been sent to the Carolingian court by Emperor Theophilos in 839. There were also people of Scandinavian descent in the top echelons of the Roman elite at the time.⁷ However, he did not openly connect them with these attackers who had struck Constantinople like a thunderbolt. It seems that, somehow, it was not worthy of mention that these people had any relationship with the Rus that Theophilos had dealt with some twenty years before.

How large was the expedition of the Rus against Constantinople? Unfortunately, there is little indication of their numbers in Photios' sermons which have to be supplemented by later narrative sources. In the tenth-century source *Chronicle of Master Symeon the Logothete*, which covers the years 842 to 948, there is a description of an attack by the "impious Rus" (τῶν ἀθέων Ῥῶς) against Constantinople, which is said to have occurred as Emperor Michael III was on a campaign against the Hagarenes, that is, the Arabs. The attackers are described as having surrounded Constantinople with two hundred ships, and the emperor quickly returned to the capital. As the emperor and Photios put the relic of the Veil of the Holy Virgin into the sea, there arose a tempest which dispersed the boats of the barbarians, with only a few of them escaping.⁸

It is confirmed in the first homily of Photios that Emperor Michael was absent from Constantinople at the time of the attack. In the Photios' words, "the emperor endures long labours beyond the frontier, and the army has marched away to toil with him".⁹ However, Symeon's description of the destruction of the Rus fleet lies in contrast to Photios' account, which depicts the barbarians as having become wealthy and renowned as a result of this expedition. Therefore, the *Chronicle of Master Symeon* may very well be infused with later legend. However, its account of the number of Rus ships involved in the attack on Constantinople fits with the number

given by another source, the anonymous *Brussels Chronicle*, which is the only source which provides an exact date for the attack.¹⁰

The *Brussels Chronicle* is not a contemporary source; it was probably composed in the eleventh century, and it not certain what sources it was based on. However, the date provided by the *Brussels Chronicle*, 18 June 860, is partly corroborated by one of the earliest sources for the attack, the *Life of Patriarch Ignatios* by Niketas of Paphlagonia, which was written around 880. Ignatios, who was the Photios' predecessor as Patriarch of Constantinople, was deposed in 858 and exiled to the island of Terebinthos in the Sea of Marmora. He had been moved around, but had recently returned to Terebinthos in February of 860, according to the chronology of the source, when the island was invaded and devastated by the Rus.

For at that time the bloodthirsty Scythian race called Russians advanced across the Black Sea to the Bosphorus plundering every region and all the monasteries, and they also overran the small island dependencies of Byzantium, carrying off all the chattels and money and slaying all the people they captured. In addition, they attacked with barbaric spirit and impulse the monasteries of the patriarch and removed every possession that they found; and they seized twenty-two of his most loyal household servants and cut all of them to pieces with axes on the stern of one of their boats.¹¹

This most likely would have occurred in the summer of 860. It is evident that the raids of the Rus affected not only the capital, but also the places surrounding it. As in the homilies of Photios, the Rus seem to be a relatively recently discovered people, who suddenly need a separate identification from the other northern peoples, which were generally known as Scythians in Roman sources. The biographer is shocked by an attack on the monasteries, echoing contemporary Latin descriptions of Viking brutality in the West. The most shocking feature of these Viking raids was not their violence per se, but that the Church was not immune from their depredations. This narrative also gives some credence to dates given in the *Brussels Chronicle*, which makes it seem that it had access to another source of information beyond the *Chronicle of Master Symeon*, such as a source in which the attack was precisely dated.

If the Rus could muster two hundred ships, as stated in these two chronicles, then the attack on Constantinople was evidently a well-planned expedition carried out by an organized army. This army had travelled a long way to reach Constantinople, through territories which were

populated by peoples who might be inimical to the Rus, lands which the ambassadors to Ingelheim 21 years earlier had been eager to avoid on their way home. This attack was a huge undertaking which must have been the result of a thorough and carefully considered plan, the execution of which required a great amount of time and resources.

The military expedition of Emperor Michael III against the Arabs, mentioned in the *Chronicle of Master Symeon*, would have been a part of his ongoing campaign against Amr, or Umar, the Emir of Melitene in Cappadocia. The campaign is mentioned by several historians from the Roman Empire, but its chronology is difficult to establish.¹² Nevertheless, this campaign meant that the bulk of the Roman army was often far removed from the capital and this would have made the city an easier target for the Rus. The best source for the attack, the homilies of Photios, can be used neither to confirm nor deny that the army was absent on this occasion, although he notes the absence of the Emperor.

Patriarch Photios' message in his two sermons was stated clearly and unambiguously: the Rus were likened to a force of nature; they were not a part of the oecumene of civilized nations. However, according to his encyclical letter from the year 867, the response to the attack was in line with the preferred goals of Roman diplomacy: missionaries were sent to the Rus to try to convert them to Christianity. The goal was to incorporate the Rus into the imperial ecclesiastical system and, in the process, make them political allies.

In the encyclical letter from 867, Photios could report some success in this endeavour:

the so-called Rhos, who, after subjugating their neighbouring tribes and becoming boundlessly proud and bold, raised their hand against the Roman Empire, now even they have exchanged their Hellenic and godless teaching, which they held before, for pure and genuine Christian faith. They have made themselves our subjects and friends, and, instead of their petty plundering and their great audacity, they are now charitable. And now the love and zeal of their faith has gone to such lengths (as Paul once said: Blessed is God in eternity) that they have accepted a bishop and a pastor that were sent to them and they are embracing the religious observances of the Christians with much effort and concern.¹³

Thus, the imperial mission to the Rus seems to have met with initial success, reminiscent of the Carolingian mission to the Swedes some 35 years

earlier. However, the success of such diplomatic efforts seems to indicate that the Rus were not as leaderless as Photios had indicated in his initial description of them, as early missionary success usually depended on cooperation with local rulers. In addition, if the Rus already had a semblance of rulership which was capable of diplomacy in 839, it is hardly likely that such leadership had weakened by the 860s, as they were able to carry out a massive attack on one of the biggest and most well-defended cities in the world. Photios himself admits as much when he mentions the subjugation of the neighbouring tribes by the Rus, which is surely an indication of an increase in state and military power. In any case, his characterization of the Rus as leaderless could simply mean that they were not subject to true leadership, that is, of the God-loving emperor in Constantinople or any other Christian monarch.

A mission to the Khazars in 861, which included the missionary Constantine (later known as Saint Cyril, the apostle of the Slavs), seems to have been dispatched soon after the attack on Constantinople. Although not stated in any source, it may be surmised that one of its objectives was to influence the Rus through the mediation of the Khazars. If that is the case, this would indicate that Roman officials were aware of a connection between these two peoples and the existence of a khaganus for the Rus who might have been subject to Khazar influence. Another possibility is that this was mainly a fact-finding mission, and that Constantine and his fellow emissaries were supposed to gather intelligence which might be used to determine a policy concerning the Rus. In either case, it is clear that Roman diplomacy towards the Rus in the 860s would have been directed at their putative court and ruler.

This leads us to the question of whether the scope of the attack on Constantinople is an indication of consolidation of power among the Rus. Can the assertion of Photios, that the Rus were a leaderless nation, a force of nature which had engulfed the Roman Empire, be taken at face value? Or should the attack on Constantinople be taken as an indication of change happening to the Rus at that time, and that the attack was the result of such change? Was the leaderless nation becoming a more organized entity? The problem of Rus state formation is a thorny one and can be only partly dealt with using written sources. However, archaeological remains offer some intriguing clues as to what was happening in Rus settlements in the latter half of the ninth century. Important events seldom occur in isolation; they are always a part of a larger trend of social and political change.

THE MISSIONARY MAN, HE'S GOT GOD ON HIS SIDE

There are several indications which lead to the conclusion that political authority was being consolidated among the Rus around 860. It was a remarkable feat to be able to plan such a large expedition, and that in itself makes it likely that the Rus were entering a new phase in their development. Considerable resources and organization would have been needed to muster such a large fleet and to move it to the Black Sea. Even if the patriarch had no knowledge of organized leadership among the Rus before this time, the attack could hardly have taken place without such a plan.

There seems to have been some internal strife among the Rus at this time, perhaps connected with their increasing military capabilities. This can be inferred from the fact that Staraia Ladoga was burnt to the ground in the late 860s.¹⁴ Who was responsible for this conflagration? Were the leaders of the expedition to Constantinople uniting the Viking bands of the North at that time, with force if deemed necessary? Or, were the Christianized allies of Constantinople bringing retribution upon their Nordic countrymen of Staraia Ladoga? Both of these scenarios are possible, but it is hardly a coincidence that an attack on this important settlement took place so soon after the well-organized attack on Constantinople.

It seems that the mission from Constantinople, mentioned in Photios' encyclical letter of 867, had some effect on the Rus. We have some reason to believe that their next raid was not directed towards the Roman Empire, but rather towards the Emirate of Tabaristan on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. According to a brief note made by the thirteenth century Persian historian Ibn Isfandiyar, this raid occurred during the reign of Hasan ibn Zayd (r. 864–884) and the Rus raiders were defeated and slain.¹⁵ This expedition is only mentioned in this very late source, and then only in reference to a later raid that had occurred in the early tenth century. It is thus supported only by the very thinnest of evidence, but if it took place, it would support the general picture that the Rus were becoming more aggressive at that time.

Even if badly documented and ultimately unsuccessful, the expedition against Tabaristan, along with the much larger raid on Constantinople some years earlier, might be an indication that the Rus were becoming more organized and militaristic, perhaps due to a rising military aristocracy asserting control over the traders who had established the settlements at Staraia Ladoga and Rurikovo Gorodische. A more belligerent attitude

towards Islamic emirates on the Caspian Sea might have coincided with a more peaceful attitude towards the Christian empire at Constantinople.

In the tenth-century *Life of Basil the Emperor*, there is a more detailed account of the mission to the Rus, now credited to Emperor Basil I (r. 867–886) and the Patriarch Ignatios (r. 867–877). The mission is said to have been led by an archbishop who persuaded the Rus to undertake baptism by placing the Holy Gospel into a fire, from which it emerged unscathed. In this source, the Rus are described as being led by a leader (Gr. ἄρχων) and a group of elders (Gr. γέροντες) which met at an assembly (Gr. σύλλογος).¹⁶ Even if the source is not contemporary, its depiction of a hierarchical Rus society is convincing. It would have taken more than a leaderless group of barbarians to strike such a blow to the mighty Roman Empire. It does not follow that the organization of the Rus was rigorously stratified, no more so than among the Scandinavian contemporary monarchies where kings often had little power. It is also not likely that all Rus belonged to the same polity, there could easily have been various, and even competing, groups among them.

The most likely location for these people who planned the Rus expedition to Constantinople, and which later received missionaries from the Church in Constantinople, is the settlement at Rurikovo Gorodische, or Hólmgarðr. These traders would be closer to the southern regions than the settlers at Staraja Ladoga, but nevertheless their homelands could justifiably be described as a part of the remote North, in such terms as Photios used to depict the homelands of the attackers. Of course, there are other possibilities, as the sources do not give a clear indication of the identity of the attackers.

Little is known about the fate of the earliest Roman missionaries to the Rus, who were active in the 860s and perhaps longer. There is complete silence about them, and the Rus in general, in Roman sources in the following decades. Therefore, it is clear that the threat from this new entity had subsided, at least for the moment. There are no material indications of major disturbances among the Rus in this time. Staraja Ladoga recovered from the fire and became more densely settled and better protected. Trade seems to have continued unabated.

Whether coincidental or not, there seems to have been a halt in contact between the Rus and the Islamic world at the same time. Between 870 and 900 the flow of silver dirhams from the Islamic world to the lands of the Rus and to Scandinavia seems to have decreased, raising the possibility of a “silver crisis” at this time.¹⁷ This might be due to factors unrelated to the

Rus political situation. The political crisis which engulfed the Abbasid Caliphate in the late ninth century might have been detrimental to silver exports, as the Emirate of the Samanids had not yet replaced the caliphate as the most important business partner of the northern nations. Another possible cause might have been unrest on the Pontic-Caspian steppe, caused by the Magyars, Pechenegs, or some other nomadic peoples. But, whatever the cause, it seems unlikely that the silver shortage would have had no effect on the Rus.

Whatever the cause, Rus settlement in the North seem to have been undergoing a transitional period, rather than one of decline, as they enjoyed continued growth in the last decades of the ninth century. The Rus were on the move and had their eye on the southern regions of the steppe.

GOING SOUTH: THE SETTLEMENT AT GNĚZDOVO

In the ninth century the Rus founded a settlement at Gnězdovo on the Upper Dnieper, around 13 kilometers from modern Smolensk, which was not settled until the latter part of the eleventh century. Gnězdovo was probably the original Smolensk (ON. Smáleskja), and the town had been moved after a few centuries. In the middle of the tenth century, the town was known by the name Miliniska, which is probably a graecized version of the Old Norse name Smáleskja.¹⁸

Gnězdovo was a modest-sized settlement until the 930s, but may be regarded as an advance guard for future colonization further south.¹⁹ From here it was possible to control the routes along the Western Dvina, those flowing into the Baltic, and the traffic going south via the Dnieper and then east towards the Volga. The Gnězdovo settlement was thus a strategic outpost, but seems to have been sparsely populated in the ninth century. The region between the Dvina and the Dnieper was mostly populated by Baltic and Slavic peoples, in moderately small numbers. At the time of the establishment of Gnězdovo, and the first decades after its settlement, there was not much to gain from this region, but the Rus were clearly thinking ahead and of the possibility of establishing closer contact with the Black Sea region and the Roman Empire.

A foothold on the Dnieper would be useful to the Rus, as the course of the river leads towards the Black Sea. Nevertheless, the waterway of the Dnieper was not easily navigated, and the area south of Gnězdovo was controlled by peoples which could be less than friendly towards the Rus.

The settlement of this old Smolensk was thus a cautious attempt to enter new territory, an experiment which would not yield any substantial results until later times.

One possible reason is that the Pontic steppe was an exceptionally difficult region to cross in this time. By the 830s the region between the Danube and the Dnieper, known in Hungarian as *Etelköz*, had become dominated by the Magyars, a confederation of seven Finno-Ugric tribes which had migrated west from their original homelands close to the Ural Mountains sometime in the eighth or early ninth century. They appear in contemporary written sources as allies of the Bulgarians. It is a distinct possibility the Magyars were identical to the “barbarous tribes that were very fierce and savage”, mentioned in *Annales Bertiniani*, whose land the Rus had to travel to reach the court of the Roman emperor in Constantinople shortly before 839. By the 860s, the Magyars had separated from the Khazars and had begun to carry out raids in the west. In *Annales Bertiniani*, such a raid against the Eastern Frankish Empire and the Kingdom of Moravia is dated to 862.²⁰

In the aforementioned mission to the Khazars in 861, somewhere north of the Black Sea, Saint Constantine was attacked by Magyars, who:

fell upon him howling like wolves and wishing to kill him. But he was not frightened and did not forsake his prayers, crying out only, “Lord, have mercy!” for he had already completed the office. Seeing him, they were calmed by God’s design and began to bow to him. And upon hearing edifying words from his lips, they released him and his entire retinue in peace.²¹

The terror evoked by the Magyars seems very real. Even if they showed mercy to an unarmed missionary, that in itself is described as nothing short of miraculous. It is evident that they would have been a formidable obstacle in the way of the Rus or anyone else trying to reach the Black Sea.

With the Pontic-Caspian steppe divided between the Magyars and the Khazars, as well as many other people alternately fighting or making alliances with them, the Rus did not have much room for manoeuvre. Nevertheless, the settlement at Gnëzdovo was clearly a cautious attempt at entering this region. The foothold gained there was to become very significant a few decades later, when the Rus continued their expansion along the Dnieper.

THE GREAT GAME OF THE NINTH CENTURY

Patriarch Photios regarded the Rus attackers on Constantinople as a force of nature, akin to a gruesome weather event or a senseless beast seeking pray. The reason for the attack was to be found among the inhabitants of the capital, as a punishment for their sins and their frivolous lifestyles. The rationale of the Rus was inexplicable, or perhaps it required no explanation. Nevertheless, the patriarch noted that the attack had increased the fame and fortune of the Rus, in fact, created a name for this previously obscure people. Such a fighting force, however, did not materialize out of thin air, and the reasons for the Rus attack on Constantinople should be looked at in the context of long-term conjunctures.

Regarding the long-term perspective of archaeological evidence, it is evident that for 12–13 decades, from ca. 775 to ca. 900, there existed systems of trade between the Roman Empire and the Abbasid Caliphate, on one hand, and between the Baltic region and the lands of the Rus, on the other. The trade routes went through the Caucasus region and the Khaganate of the Khazars, which dominated the steppe east of the Dnieper, but also possibly through the lands of the Magyars west of the Dnieper. The Scandinavian traders at Staraja Ladoga and Rurikovo Gorodische were important intermediaries between the Khazars and the Baltic region and Scandinavia, and were probably dependent on the goodwill of the former to carry out their trade. Therefore, it is not surprising that they might have used Khazar titles such as khagan within their pre-state structure.

In the latter half of the ninth century, this system entered a period of crisis. The main catalyst was either the political crisis engulfing the Abbasid Caliphate at the time or a disruption in the trade routes. The response of the Rus was twofold, as far as can be conjectured from the limited source material. First, there was the push for stronger political organization, probably led by the military aristocracy, which provided the leader, and the group of elders among the Rus. Led by this group, the Rus sought to make up for the decrease in trade through raids, such as the spectacular raid on Constantinople in 860 and possibly some raids on the emirates in the Caspian region. Thus they slowly moved towards the south, into the Dnieper region, as manifested by the settlement in Gnëzdovo.

This course of events is, however, not the only possible one. If the silver crisis did not hit the Rus with any severity until the 870s, we can surmise that the process of state-formation and the Rus' movements southward

were not the consequences of that particular crisis. On the contrary, the silver crisis may have halted development that was already in progress: stronger political organization and slow movement south. These developments might have been hindered by the very factors that caused the silver crisis, the political unrest on the Pontic-Caspian steppe and the weakening of the centralized government of the Abbasid dynasty.

What is very clear, however, is that in the final decades of the ninth century, for whatever reason, there seems to have been a marked shortage of silver coins compared to earlier periods. This might indicate that the volume of trade had quickly fallen and the hard-won gains made through Rus trade were in jeopardy. The Rus were compelled to make some changes, which they did in the tenth century.

NOTES

1. *Photii De Rossorum Incursione*, p. 162.
2. *Photii De Rossorum Incursione*, p. 163.
3. *Photii De Rossorum Incursione*, p. 165.
4. See Somerville and McDonald, *The Vikings and Their Age*, pp. 93–94.
5. *Photii De Rossorum Incursione*, pp. 167–68.
6. Photius, Encyclical of 886: PG CII, col. 736–7.
7. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, p. 26.
8. *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*, pp. 245–47.
9. *Photii De Rossorum Incursione*, p. 165.
10. See *Chroniques Byzantines du Manuscrit 11,376*, p. 33, n. 2.
11. *The Life of Patriarch Ignatius*, p. 44.
12. See *Iosephi Genesisii Regum Libri Quattor*, pp. 65–69; *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum*, pp. 98–101.
13. Photios, PG 102, coll. 736–37; see also *Theophanes Continuatus*, p. 196.
14. See Duczko, *Viking Rus*, pp. 86–87.
15. Ibn Isfandiyar, *An Abridged Translation of the History of Tabaristan*, p. 199.
16. *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur Liber quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris amplectitur*, pp. 312, 314, 316.
17. See Noonan, “The first major silver crisis”.
18. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, p. 56.
19. See Duczko, *Viking Rus*, pp. 155–61.
20. *Quellen zur karolingischen Reichsgeschichte* II, 114; see Róna-Tas, *Hungarians and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, p. 329.
21. *Konstantin i Metode Solunjani*, p. 110.



Accommodation

A NEW SITUATION IN THE EAST

In 886, the Roman emperor Basil I was succeeded by his sons Leo VI and Alexander. The elder, Leo, soon established himself as an autocratic ruler. He was a scholar of some distinction, having been tutored by the learned Photios, who had been reinstated as patriarch in 877. Leo was not very grateful to his tutor, as one of his first acts after accession was to secure his dismissal. Nevertheless, Photios' instruction had made its mark on the emperor. Leo produced scholarly works on many subjects, including political orations, liturgical poems, and theological treatises. He wrote, or at least sponsored, a military manual, known as *Taktika*, and *The Book of the Eparch*, in which the rules and regulations for trade and trade organizations in Constantinople are listed. Legends arose about him, among which was that he was a prophet and magician, or that he would go about Constantinople in disguise, trying to root out injustice or corruption. Leo seems to have been interested in diplomacy, but, for a long time, the importance of the Rus to his diplomatic policy seems to have been marginal, at best.

A glimpse into the worldview of Leo and his officials can be gained from a handbook of diplomacy, usually known as *De administrando imperio*. It was published in its final form as a didactic work in 952 by the reigning emperor, Constantine Porphyrogenetos, the son of Leo VI, and presented to Constantine's son, Romanos. It contains much valuable

material on the neighbours of the Roman Empire, including the Rus, which will be explored in greater detail in later chapters of this book. However, the book is compiled of heterogeneous parts, and one section (containing chapters 27–46, in the modern edition) seems to deal with Roman diplomacy towards their neighbours at an earlier period, around 900. This earlier section was very likely commissioned by Emperor Leo VI.

This section of *De administrando imperio* mainly deals with existing and potential allies of the Empire in the four different zones where Roman diplomats were most active: Southern Italy, the Balkans, the Pontic steppe, and western Transcaucasia. There seems to be an elaborate purpose for the work, as it does not deal with rival great powers, such as the Carolingians, Bulgarians, Khazars, and Abbasids, but rather with peoples inhabiting contested areas. There is little mention of the Rus in this section, which indicates that they were not a major concern for Leo at this time.

The section in Emperor Leo's diplomatic manual that concerned the north was evidently formed after a new political configuration had occurred in the Pontic steppe. In 897, according to *De administrando imperio*, a Turkic people, the Pechenegs, formerly residing between the Volga and Ural Rivers, was expelled by the Khazars and consequently fought against the Magyar allies of the emperor, in collaboration with the ruler of Bulgaria. They drove the Magyars from the Pontic steppe into the Carpathian basin. There the Magyars settled in Pannonia, the territory of modern Hungary.¹ This was a major upheaval and had serious repercussions for European politics in the early tenth century. The Magyars then began their raiding of Western Europe, whereas the Bulgarians continued their rivalry with the Roman Empire.

Despite the Rus territory only being a one day's journey from the lands of the Pechenegs, the Rus are not mentioned in conjunction with these events.² Clearly, they were not an important player in these wars among nomadic powers. In his *Taktika*, Leo VI does mention the "northern Scythians" who used smaller, lighter, and faster rafts than the Arabs because of larger ships not being useful on the rivers leading to the Black Sea.³ Such boats had to be able to navigate shoals and shallows, or to be hauled overland for some stretches. It is thus clear that he was aware of their existence; nevertheless, they were of no major concern to him at this time.

There are, however, some indications, that the Rus were taking advantage of the complex situation which had arisen on the Pontic steppe in the wake of these events. From outpost of Gnëzdovo the Rus were moving south along the Dnieper. They seem to have secured further footholds on

the Middle Dnieper, including the town which was to define the Rus state in the Middle Ages, so much that they are often known as the Kievan Rus.

The settlement on the Kiev heights on the Middle Dnieper had not been an important trading town in the ninth century. There have not been any silver hoards from that period discovered in this region, and even individual finds of dirhams are rare. The most influential power in that area in the ninth century were the Khazars, who called the settlement Sambatas. This, however, was about to change. Around 900, the riverside district of Podol became more densely populated. This seems to coincide with a growth in trade in the region. There was a new type of structure built in Podol at that time, mostly one-room wooden cabins similar in construction technique to structures in Staraja Ladoga and Riurikovo Gorodishche. This might indicate that the Rus had established themselves in Kiev around that time. Nevertheless, archaeological finds in this region dating to the first half of the tenth century which can be connected to people of Norse origin are relatively rare. The activities of the Rus in Kiev in the early tenth century are an enigma, in contrast to their very clear presence there some decades later.

At the same time, the beginning of the tenth century, there was also a population increase in the settlements around Chernigov, on the tributary river Desna, northeast of Kiev. High-status graves in cemeteries at Shestovitsy, a few kilometres from Chernigov, demonstrate the presence of both Scandinavian objects and mortuary customs.⁴ Clearly, a warrior elite of the Rus had established itself along the Middle Desna. This alone constitutes enough evidence to indicate that the Rus were on the move southwards.

In the ninth century, these southern regions had been mostly inhabited by Slavs under Khazar hegemony, but around 900 the raids of the Pechenegs led to Khazar fortresses being abandoned along the Upper Don and the Donets. The simultaneous increased activity along the Dnieper may have been a reaction to these upheavals. What is unclear is the nature of these settlements in the valleys of the Dnieper and the Desna, and especially to what degree their rise was connected to the Rus in the early tenth century.

Was it the increased activity of the Rus around the Dnieper that caused Emperor Leo VI to take more note of them? Whatever the reason, both the Rus and the emperor seem to have felt the need to reposition trade relations between the Rus and the Roman Empire on a more formal basis.

Thus, they entered negotiations which resulted in a remarkable document, the Roman-Rus treaty of 911.

THE TREATY

From the period of the mission, which was reportedly sent sometime around 870, until the early tenth century there seems to have been very little formal contact between the Rus and the Roman Empire. As has already been noted, Emperor Leo VI viewed the Rus as insignificant to his most important diplomatic efforts. The signing of a formal treaty, dated 2 September 911, was thus an unprecedented step, the circumstances of which are not explained in the document itself. The rationale of the treaty is explained in its preamble in the following manner:

We of the Rus' nation: Karl, Ingjald, Farulf, Vermund, Hrollaf, Gunnar, Harold, Karni, Frithleif, Hroarr, Angantyr, Throand, Leithulf, Fast, and Steinvith, are sent by Oleg, Great Prince [*velikji knjaz'*] of Rus', and by all the serene and great princes and the great boyars under his sway, unto you, Leo and Alexander and Constantine, great Autocrats in God, Emperors of the Greeks, for the maintenance and proclamation of the long-standing amity which joins Greeks and Russes, in accordance with the desires of our Great Princes and at their command, and in behalf of all those Rus who are subject to the hand of our Prince.

Our serenity, above all desirous, through God's help, of maintaining and proclaiming such amicable relations as now exist between Christians and Russians, has often deemed it proper to publish and confirm this amity not merely in words but also in writing and under a firm oath sworn upon our weapons according to our religion and our law. As we previously agreed in the name of God's peace and amity, the articles of this convention are as follows...⁵

The purpose of the document, which exists only in an Old Slavonic copy, seems to have been to cement the relationship between the Rus and the Roman Empire in writing, as a further confirmation of a relationship that was already considered amicable and long-standing. Another impetus might have been to confirm the status of the Grand Prince Oleg (ON. Helgi), who regarded himself as the leader of the Rus. Emperor Leo VI was interested in regulating trade in Constantinople, as evidenced by *The Book of the Eparch*. Clearly, the Rus presence in Constantinople was

already notable as to require a clarification of the status of Rus merchants there.

There is no reference in the treaty to an existing mission among the Rus. On the contrary, it makes a dichotomy between Christians, that is, subjects of the Roman emperor, and the Rus. The treaty does not include any reference to the location of the Rus who were making this treaty; it does not state that Oleg or any of the Rus leaders mentioned resided in Kiev or Chernigov, rather than further north.

One important stipulation of the treaty is the obligation of the Rus to assist ships that are “detained by high winds upon a foreign shore” and “pilot it through every dangerous passage until it arrives at a place of safety” or, if the ship is permanently incapacitated, “we Russes will extend aid to the crew of this ship, and conduct them with their merchandise in all security, in case such an event takes place near Greek territory”.⁶ In the event that such an accident would happen “near the Russian shore, the ship’s cargo shall be disposed of, and we Russes will remove whatever can be disposed of for the account of the owners. Then, when we proceed to Greece with merchandise or upon an embassy to your Emperor, we shall render up honourably the price of the sold cargo of the ship”.⁷ These obligations seem to be rather extensive, and evidently any benefits the Rus were to gain from this treaty were deemed substantial enough to warrant such obligations. These, however, are not stated in the treaty but would have included amity with the Roman Empire and freedom of trade within its borders.

There are some clues observed in the treaty as to the customs of the Rus and their political situation at the time. References to the law of the Rus are reminiscent of the customary legislation in the Scandinavian countries. It mentions slaves belonging to the Rus and the obligation to return an escaped slave to its owner. There is also a reference to “Russes professionally engaged in Greece under the orders of the Christian Emperor”, which would make the treaty the earliest record of Scandinavians serving in the Roman army (Fig. 1).⁸

At the beginning of the treaty there is a statement that the Rus “shall conclude a peace with you Greeks, and love each other with all our heart”, but the mention of a long-standing amity in the preamble makes it unlikely that this was a peace treaty.⁹ Rather, it seems to be an attempt to regulate a strengthening relationship, with increased interaction between the Rus and the subjects of the Roman emperor.



Fig. 1 The Halfdan runic inscription—Hagia Sophia

The treaty has been only preserved as a part of a larger narrative, known as the *Primary Chronicle*, or *The Tale of Bygone Years* (OS. Повѣсть временныхъ лѣтъ), about which more will be said later. There it forms a part of a narrative about the founding of the Kievan Rus, and it may well have been revised to serve the purposes of that foundation story. However, the document does not contain any obvious insertions for that purpose, for instance there is no mention of Kiev or any surrounding cities. The same cannot be said for another document which was inserted into the chronicle for the year 907, in which the foundation of later cities, such as Pereiaslavl, are mentioned anachronistically.¹⁰

The treaty is placed into in the *Primary Chronicle* in context of the attack by Prince Oleg on Constantinople in 907. There is, however, no distinct reference to such a raid in any Roman sources, which is in stark contrast to the raid of 860. It could thus be surmised that Oleg's attack on Constantinople was a later invention, perhaps intended to explain the circumstances of the treaty, which itself does not refer to any raid, only to a long-standing friendship between the Rus and the Roman Empire.

According to the *Book of Ceremonies*, The Rus furnished 700 men to the imperial fleet sent by Emperor Leo VI on an expedition to Crete in 911, the same year the treaty was made.¹¹ This might be a part of the incentive for the treaty, the emperor wanted auxiliaries and was prepared to grant the Rus some trading concessions to acquire them. The Rus continued to supply warriors to the Roman emperor, and were also a part of an expedition to Crete in 949. At that time they sent 584 warriors and 45 servants.¹² It should be noted that the use of foreigners in the army of the Roman Empire was not all that common in the early tenth century, in

contrast to later custom.¹³ Even if this force was relatively small in size, a precedent had been set which may have had some bearing on the recruitment of Scandinavian mercenaries later in the tenth century.

THE RUS AND THE KHAZARS

The movement of the Rus along the shores of the Dnieper marked a new development in their activities. This had been, however, hardly noted by most contemporaries and may at that time have been secondary to their principal efforts around the Volga and the Caspian Sea.

Several decades after Ibn Khurradadhbih described the activities of the Rus travelling to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, another Iranian, Abu 'Ali Ahmad b. 'Umar Ibn Rustah from Isfahan, wrote his *Book of Precious Jewels* (*Kitab al-A'laq an-Nafisah*). This book was probably composed in the first decades of the tenth century and must have been an extensive encyclopaedia dealing with many branches of knowledge. The surviving version deals with geography and other related subjects.

Ibn Rustah used the work of Ibn Khurradadhbih as a source for his itineraries and distances, but his discussion is more scholarly and encyclopaedic and not as much determined by administrative necessities. There is also some new information in Ibn Rustah's work, which might reflect a more contemporary situation. He relates that the Rus live on an island, promontory, or peninsula, surrounded by a lake (*jazirah bayna al-buhayra*). He notes that their ruler bears the title *khagan* and that the Rus raid the as-Saqalibah whom they take prisoners and sell to the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars. The Rus are said to have not cultivated lands and that they live on what they amass through pillaging the Saqalibah.¹⁴ The island described by Ibn Rustah might refer to the peculiarly insular character of Gorodishche/Hólmgarðr, although it can also suit other settlements of the Rus.

Ibn Rustah also recounts customs, clothing, and funerary rituals, and mentions elements similar to those found in the later works of Ibn Fadlan and Al-Mas'udi, of which the most notable are the sacrifice of a woman alongside her master and the presence of a gold bracelet in funerary rituals. Ibn Rustah makes no attempt at geographically locating the Rus, but places them among peoples that live in the geographical area that extends approximately from the areas around the Caspian Sea westwards to just north of the Black Sea and northwards to the mid-Volga region where the Volga Bulgars resided.¹⁵

A few decades later, another important text was composed which discusses the Rus in some detail, Al-Mas‘udi’s monumental *Muruġ al-dhahab wa ma‘adin jawhar* (*The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Jewels*). Al-Mas‘udi was from Baghdad and was a prolific writer and polymath, sometimes called the “Herodotos of the Arabs”.¹⁶ He composed *The Meadows of Gold* in 943 and revised the work in 947 and again in 956. Evidently Al-Mas‘udi had at his disposal a vast number of sources including Arabic texts, translations of Greek classical authors, and Pahlavi texts. He also sought inspiration and material from his extensive travels throughout the Islamic world and some of its adjacent regions, and often applied his own observations to corroborate or refute older data. His work contains several passages concerning the Rus that seem mostly unrelated to the works of his predecessors. No other author provides as many different accounts of the Rus, which can partially be explained by the sheer volume and scope of Al-Mas‘udi’s work.

In a description of the Khazar lands, Al-Mas‘udi reports that the Rus lived there in a quarter of their city (presumably Itil) and gives an account of some of their funerary and judicial customs. According to him, the Rus also seem to have entered the Khazar army as mercenaries. He notes their custom of burning the dead on large pyres.¹⁷

Al-Mas‘udi mentions another important site of the Rus, a gulf in the Black Sea (*khalij min bahr nitas*), into which runs the river of the Khazars (*nahr al-Khazar*), which may here denote the River Don. Al-Mas‘udi further notes that they are mighty people who obey no king or law and that among them are merchants who trade with the Volga Bulgars. It is also related that there is a large silver mine in the Rus’ region.¹⁸ A short piece mentions Rus vessels entering or being blocked from the Bosporos.¹⁹

The most important statement of Al-Mas‘udi concerning the Rus is a description of a raid on the southern coastline of the Caspian Sea. They had arrived via a gulf in the Black Sea and gained access to the Caspian Sea, obtaining the Khazars’ permission to plunder by promising them half of whatever they amassed in return. Several towns were targeted (Daylam, Gilan, Tabaristan, and Abaskun near Jurġān) and the attacks were violent and brutal:

The Rus shed blood, destroyed the women and children, took booty, and raided and burnt in all directions. ... When they had gained enough booty, and were tired of what they were about, they started for the mouth of the

Khazar river, informing the king of the Khazars, and conveying to him rich booty, according to the conditions which he had fixed with them.²⁰

At this time, Muslims in the service of the khagan learned of their atrocities and took revenge, fighting with the Rus for three days. The few Rus that escaped their retaliation fled northwards to the lands of the Burtas and Bulghar where they were also killed.

This happened, according to Al-Mas'udi, after the year 912/913.²¹ The account of the Rus attack on peoples on the south or south-eastern coast of the Caspian Sea was later retold in an expanded version by Ibn Miskawayh (Persian, c. 932–1030), and accounts of this and other Rus raids in this region also feature in several later works.²²

Al-Mas'udi's passages indicate that, circa the mid-tenth century, there existed several groups of Rus living more or less within the Khazar realm. He does not discuss the trade relationship between the Rus and the Volga Bulgars, which was mentioned by Ibn Rustah. That, however, is discussed extensively in another source, which will be discussed in the following section.

THE DIRTIEST CREATURES OF GOD

Following the late ninth century silver crisis, there was a marked increase in the circulation of silver dirhams in the early tenth century. Hoards of silver from that period can be found in Scandinavia, the Baltic region and the lands of the Rus in the northern taiga. A vast majority of these dirhams were issued by the Samanid emirs of Eastern Iran and Central Asia, whose domain extended over the Iranian plateau, with its centre in the Transoxiana town of Bukhara. The importance of trade with the Samanids resulted in re-alignment in the eastern trade routes. Most of the Samanid silver dirhams bypassed the lands of the Khazars and instead went through Central Asia, through the lands of the Bulgars, another Turkic people who live along the Volga. Consequently, the Rus cultivated trade with the Bulgars of the East. It was on the Volga that the Rus caught the attention of an Arab diplomat, Ahmad Ibn Fadlan al-Abbas ibn Rashid ibn Hammad, who had been sent on a diplomatic mission from Baghdad, the lands of the Bulgars. He wrote a travelogue, which is one of the exceedingly few eyewitness accounts for the peoples and forces in the Eurasian Steppe region for the time period before the Dominican and Franciscan missions to the Mongols in the thirteenth century.

The mission of Ibn Fadlan was sent by the court of Caliph Al-Muqtadir in Baghdad (r. 908–932) to the realm of the Bulgars in June 921, thousands of kilometres to the north on the confluence of the rivers Volga and Kama. The mission was initiated in response to a letter from Almish ibn Shilki Elteber, the king of the Volga Bulgars, who had petitioned the caliph to send him someone to instruct him in religious law and who could acquaint him with the religious codes of Islam. The mission turned out to be a failure, and the “correction” of the Bulgar practice of Islam did not go over smoothly. The account of the mission composed by Ibn Fadlan does not dwell on those issues, however, as it is largely devoted to ethnographic descriptions of the Bulgars and the Rus.

The section concerning the Rus immediately follows the account of the Bulgar and their land, and the events described seem to be located on Bulgar territory; at least we are not informed of any physical movement away from it. Ibn Fadlan described the physical appearance and clothing of the Rus, with whom he is quite impressed:

I have never seen people with a more developed bodily stature than they. They are as tall as date palms, blond and ruddy, so that they do not need to wear a tunic or a coat; rather the men among them wear a garment that only covers half of his body and leaves one of his hands free. Each of them has an axe, a sword, and a knife with him, and all of these whom we have mentioned never let themselves be separated from their weapons. Their swords are broad bladed, provided with rills, and of the Frankish type. Each one of them has from the tip of his nails to the neck figures, trees, and other things, tattooed in dark green. Each of the women has fastened upon the two breasts a brooch of iron, silver, copper, or gold, in weight and value according to the wealth of her husband. Each brooch has a ring to which a knife is likewise fixed, and is hung upon the breast. Around the neck the women wear rings of gold and silver.²³

Ibn Fadlan was less impressed with the hygiene and sexual mores of the Rus and calls them “the dirtiest creatures of God”. He also describes their beautiful slave girls and says that “they may have intercourse with their girl while their comrades look on. At times a crowd of them may come together, and one does this in the presence of the others”.²⁴ The lack of hygiene and sexual discretion is diametrically opposite to the rigidly enforced principles regarding these elements within the Islamic culture and Ibn Fadlan’s repulsion to certain Rus customs is on a par with his disgust towards those of the Ghuzz, Pechenegs, and Bashkirs, whom he encountered on his way to Bulgar.

Ibn Fadlan also describes the Rus custom of erecting their idols and sacrificing to them, asking them for success in trade, a quick sell for a good price.²⁵ This description is to some extent consistent with accounts by other Muslim writers who predominantly portray the Rus as traders. The brooches carried by Rus women and how they correspond to their husbands' accumulated wealth, measured in tens of thousands of dirham silver coins, is indicative of Rus involvement in the silver trade in this place and period.²⁶ Their formidable appearance, weapons, and decorated bodies may reflect the level of danger posed by the environment, and possibly the trade itself, in which they participated. Their swords here described as Frankish points to the Rus' connection with other more westerly trade routes.

In the last section of the description of the Rus, Ibn Fadlan describes the funerary ritual and cremation of one of their nobles. He describes in considerable detail the necessary preparations for the ritual, including the construction of the pyre and the chieftain's preliminary grave and the sewing of the funerary garments. He mentions differences in burial rites depending on economic and social status, for if a rich man or a chieftain is buried, one of his slave-girls kills herself and is burned alongside her master, along with several animals, a custom which Ibn Fadlan describes graphically.²⁷ This passage forms about sixty per cent of the entire section of Ibn Fadlan's *Risalah* that was devoted to the Rus.

At the end of the description he quotes a man from the Rus who regards the Arabs as stupid: "You go and cast into the earth the people whom you both love and honor most among men. Then the earth, creeping things, and worms devour them. We, however, let them burn for an instant, and, accordingly he enters into paradise at once in that very hour..."²⁸ This is a key moment in Ibn Fadlan's description of the Rus. Their lifestyle provides a contrast to Arab society, characterized by their freedom and barbarity. Ibn Fadlan is impressed by the wealth of the Rus, disgusted by some of their customs, but, in the end, their description offers a glimpse into a different society, which probably was an important impetus for composing of this travelogue.

The Rus had established themselves on the Volga in the early ninth century, starting with settlement at the Sarskii fort around 800. In the late ninth century, large settlements were founded at Bolshoe Timerëvo and Mikhailovskoe, in the neighbourhood of the later town of Iaroslavl. These sites grew markedly in the early tenth century and there is clear connection

between finds from these locations and from regions in the eastern parts of Sweden and the island of Åland. There seems to have been migrations to the Volga region from these areas in particular. Nevertheless, these settlements were limited in size, inhabited by 100 to 150 people at any one period.²⁹

The markets located on the Middle Volga were the principal channel for the influx of silver to the lands of the Rus and to Scandinavia in the tenth century. The total number of dirhams imported to the Nordic lands was markedly higher in this period than during the ninth century. The development of the Rus settlements on the Upper Volga demonstrates the increase in volume of trade. However, despite an occasional raid round the Caspian Sea, the Rus were subject to the regulations and the taxes imposed by the Volga Bulgars. Therefore, they were not able to take full advantage of the Volga waterway and subsequently force their way to wealthier lands.

The renaissance of the old caravan route from Central Asia to the Middle Volga was probably due to difficulties arising in the route going between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, through the lands of the Khazars, and the route north of the Black Sea, which had been overrun by the Pechenegs. Compared to increased Rus activity in the Middle Volga region, the modest settlements on the Dnieper were still no more than isolated outposts. Prince Oleg, mentioned in the treaty of 911, was either associated with the Rus active in the Volga region or his claim to be a grand prince of the Rus is somewhat overstated.

Two key events in the history of the Rus occurred within a space of a few years: the treaty with Emperor Leo VI, in September 911, and the raid on the Caspian, dated by Al-Masudi to 912/913, after which the Rus were betrayed by the Khazars. The occurrence of these events within a relatively brief period of time is hardly coincidental. Perhaps the Grand Prince Oleg felt the need to establish a dependable relationship with the Roman Empire before undertaking such a great task as the expedition to the Caspian Sea. Or, perhaps, if Al-Mas'udi is slightly mistaken in his dating, the treaty with Constantinople was a reaction to the betrayal of the Rus by the Khazars. Even if the causal relationship between these two events cannot be established with any certainty, their occurrence within a few years is symptomatic. The Rus were trying to gain a more secure foothold in the south by making alliances with the Roman Empire and the Khazars, the two great powers in the region. The Rus were not content

with having to go through Bulghar intermediaries in their search for access to the wealth of the great empires in the south. For a moment, they were unsuccessful, but they were gradually gaining strength.

NOTES

1. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *De administrando imperio*, pp. 166, 168, 172, 174, 176.
2. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *De administrando imperio*, p. 168.
3. *The Taktika of Leo VI*, p. 532.
4. See Duczko, *Viking Rus*, pp. 238–46.
5. PVL, p. 18.
6. PVL, p. 19.
7. PVL, p. 19.
8. PVL, p. 19.
9. PVL, p. 18.
10. PVL, p. 17.
11. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *The Book of Ceremonies*, p. 651.
12. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *The Book of Ceremonies*, p. 664.
13. See Kaldellis, *Romanland*, pp. 227–29.
14. Ibn Rustah, *Kitab al-a'laq an-nafisah*, pp. 143–45.
15. See Þórir Jónsson Hraundal, *The Rus in Arabic Sources*, p. 73.
16. See Shboul, *Al-Mas'ūdī and his World*.
17. Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or* II, pp. 9–12.
18. Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or* II, p. 15.
19. Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or* II, p. 317.
20. Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or* II, pp. 19–22, transl. Duzko, *Viking Rus*, pp. 116–17.
21. Maçoudi, *Les prairies d'or* II, pp. 23–24.
22. *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate* V, pp. 67–74.
23. *Ibn-Fozzlan's und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen Älterer Zeit*, p. 4.
24. *Ibn-Fozzlan's und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen Älterer Zeit*, p. 6.
25. *Ibn-Fozzlan's und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen Älterer Zeit*, p. 8.
26. *Ibn-Fozzlan's und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen Älterer Zeit*, p. 4.
27. *Ibn-Fozzlan's und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen Älterer Zeit*, pp. 10–18.
28. *Ibn-Fozzlan's und anderer Araber Berichte über die Russen Älterer Zeit*, p. 20.
29. See Duczko, *Viking Rus*, pp. 189–201.



Engagement

INGVAR AND HELGI—FIVE PERSPECTIVES

In 941, the Rus attacked again. A large number of ships set out across the Black Sea and ravaged the regions of its southern shore, capturing some people, killing others, and burning down churches. Their attack was finally crushed by the Roman fleet in two sea battles, thanks to the use of the inflammatory substance known as Greek fire. Such a devastation had not been witnessed in a long time and it brought the Rus to the forefront of imperial concern (Fig. 1).

Five very different testimonies of the attack have been preserved. All of these sources were composed relatively soon after the event, no more than a few decades, when there were still living witnesses of the attack. However, the emphasis in the description of events varies greatly, as the purpose behind the descriptions and the context in which they were composed serve the agenda of each individual author.

The first account, the tenth-century *Chronicle of Master Symeon*, describes in some detail the attack which lasted four months, from June to September.¹ According to the *Chronicle*, the Rus sailed with 10,000 ships towards Constantinople, but were stopped by a Roman fleet at the mouth of the Black Sea. They then went on to harry Roman provinces in Asia Minor until they were checked by the Roman cavalry. The Romans thus managed to dispel the Rus fleet, but not prevent the pagans from pillaging the hinterland of Constantinople, venturing as far south as Nikomedeia.



Fig. 1 The Madrid Skylitzes (Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid, MS Graecus Vitr. 26-2)—Greek fire

Many atrocities were reported, for instance, the Rus were said to have crucified their victims and to have driven nails into their heads. The focus of this account is on their brutality and the magnitude of the threat to the empire and its subjects.

In the end, the army of the Rus was destroyed in September in a second naval battle close to Thrace. The Rus lost their entire fleet in this surprise attack, but a few of them managed to escape. Nothing is said about the leaders of the Rus or the motivation for the attack; the focus is on the Roman generals responsible for repelling the attack and the difficulties they encountered.

The second account, the tenth century *Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, also provides a brief testimony on this event, which reputedly was predicted by the saint. It describes how the Rus raided the provinces on the southern coast of the Black Sea, such as Paphlagonia and Nikomedeia, “and burned all the shoreline of the [Bosporos] Strait, just as the servant of the Lord had already prophesied”.² Then they were defeated by a large army, but most of them escaped. They were chased by the Romans and destroyed by Greek fire. “And so ended the episode with the Rus. But those who escaped our fleet fell victim to a terrible disease, dysentery, and died en route, and only a few of them escaped to their homeland, narrating there what had befallen them and what they had suffered by the Lord’s will”.³ Again, the account is a thorough description of preparations made

by the Romans against the intruders, but little is said about the reason behind the attack or the identity of those responsible.

The attack is also referenced by a third source, the late-tenth-century Roman historian Leo the Deacon. He describes how, in 971, the “Scythians” were afraid of the Romans, since “they had heard from the elders of their people how the immense army of Ingor (ON. Ingvar, OS. Igor), the father of Sphendosthlavos (OS. Sviatoslav), the current leader of the Rhos, had been reduced to ashes by the Romans in the Euxine [the Black Sea] by means of this Median fire”.⁴ Leo the Deacon also describes how later Ingor met his death “on his campaign against the Germans, when he was captured by them, tied to tree trunks, and torn in two”.⁵ The identity of these Germans is not immediately apparent, but Leo seems to have had some knowledge of political development among the Rus after the attack.

Liutprand of Cremona, who visited Constantinople a few years after the attack, provides the fourth account of this event. Liutprand mentions that the attack was led by a King Inger, but he claims that the number of ships was just above 1000 (Lat. *mille et eo amplius*), not 10,000. According to this version, the fleet of the Rus was destroyed by a few Roman ships using Greek fire. Inger himself escaped, but many prisoners were captured and executed in front of emissaries from King Hugo of Italy, the stepfather of Liutprand. Liutprand recognized the Rus as the same people who were called Normans in the West, a detail which had been noted by Arab geographers for some time.⁶

None of these four Greek and Latin sources provide any explanation for the Rus attack on the Roman Empire, nor do they provide any context for the event from the perspective of the Rus. Two sources name the leader of the Rus, Ingor or Inger, and Leo the Deacon also provides an account of his dismal fate, even if the account leaves many unanswered questions.

The fifth, and most important, testimony concerning the attack of the Rus on the Roman Empire is an anonymous Hebrew letter from the Genizah of Cairo (*The Schechter Letter*) which describes a recent raid by the Rus on Roman territory, which resembles in detail the well-known attack of 941. The writer presents himself as a subject of Joseph, the king of Khazars at the time of the raid, and thus is a contemporary of the event. According to the letter, Emperor Romanos Lekapenos had incited “HLGW [Helgo], king of RWSY [Rusia]” to attack the Khazar city of Samkarc (also known as Tamatarcha or Tmutarakan), which was situated on the eastern shore of the Kerch strait. Helgo (ON. Helgi) captured the

city by stealth but was later defeated by the Khazar official Pesakh. Pesakh then forced Helgi to attack the Roman Empire and the letter then describes a four-month naval war which corresponds to the warfare described in the *Chronicle of Master Symeon*. It also describes how the fleet of the Rus was finally eliminated by Greek fire. Helgi fled, going to Persia on a raid, where he was killed in battle.⁷

The Rus attack on Persia is also mentioned in Arab sources, including the historian Ibn Miskawayh. He relates that many of the Rus died of diarrhea caused by overindulging in fresh fruits, to which they were unaccustomed, but their leader perished in battle and the survivors were forced to retreat.⁸ This seems to be a mixture of the information offered in *The Schechter Letter* and *The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, where dysentery is also mentioned.

Helgi is the original Scandinavian form of the name of Oleg, the Grand Prince of the Rus mentioned in the treaty of 911. Is it possible that he was still alive in 941 and was one of the leaders of the attack on Constantinople, along with Ingvar, the father of the later ruler Sviatoslav? Although we cannot be sure that the same person was involved, the evidence for the participation of a Rus leader called Helgi is slightly older than that pertaining to Ingvar. Ingvar's status might have been exaggerated in later sources, as he was the father of the later king Sviatoslav, who was to lead an army against the Roman Empire a few decades later. This gives Leo the Deacon and Liutprand, who were familiar with Sviatoslav, reason to associate the raid with Ingvar, Sviatoslav's father. In Khazarian and Persian sources, Helgi was a more prominent figure and therefore more easily remembered. Thus, different memories of the Rus were preserved within different cultures.

Even if both Helgi and Ingvar actually existed and were associated with the raid of the Rus against Constantinople, it is impossible to reconstruct a single version of the events. Nevertheless, the evidence provided by Roman, West European, Islamic, and Khazar sources is much more varied and detailed than the fragmentary records of the raid in 860, let alone the obscure mission of the Rus in 839. The Rus had caught the attention of observers from different nations, who interpreted their activities within their own particular cultural context.

THE ROAD TO CONSTANTINOPLE

Reference has already been made to an imperial handbook of diplomacy, *De administrando imperio*, which was given its final form in 952 by the reigning emperor, Constantine Porphyrogenetos, and presented to his young son, Romanos, as a didactic work. It contains much valuable material on the neighbours of the Roman Empire, including the Rus, which are given particular attention in the first chapters of the book. It is very likely that gathering intelligence on the Rus became a priority for Roman diplomats after the attack of 941. However, unlike what happened in the wake of 860, this information is precise and, as far as we can tell, geographically accurate. *De administrando imperio* mentions, for the first time, several Rus cities and also is the first to provide the name of a contemporary ruler, Sviatoslav, the son of Ingor. This is actually the earliest mention of any Rus ruler in a Roman source, as Leo the Deacon's reference to Ingor is of a later date. It is noteworthy that the son of Ingvar has a Slavonic name, rather than a Scandinavian one, which suggests the Rus were rapidly becoming assimilated into the surrounding Slavonic population.

The main thrust of the description of the Rus concerns their trade with the Roman Empire. According to the treatise, the empire's main strategy was to keep at peace with the Pechenegs, who controlled the steppe north of the Black Sea. The author claims that the Rus are unable to:

come at this imperial city of the Romans, either for war or for trade, unless they are at peace with the Pechenegs, because when the Russians come with their ships to the barrages of the river and cannot pass through unless they lift their ships off the river and carry them past by portaging them on their shoulders, then the men of this nation of the Pechenegs set upon them, and, as they cannot do two things at once, they are easily routed and cut to pieces.⁹

This reflects how the concerns of the empire had changed since the attack of Ingvar or Helgi on the Roman Empire in 941, and also indicates the main strategy the Romans had adopted to avoid another attack of this kind.

However, Roman diplomats were now more well-informed about the Rus than they had been in the ninth century. At the beginning of the section concerning the Rus, the Emperor states that:

[t]he *monoxyla* [dugout canoes] which come down from outer Russia to Constantinople are from Nemogardas [Novgorod], where Sviatoslav, son of Igor, prince of Russia, had his seat, and others from the city of Miliniska

[Smolensk] and from Teliutza and Tzernigoga [Chernigov] and from Vousegrade [Vyshegrad]. All these come down the river Dnieper, and are collected together at the city of Kioava [Kiev], also called Sambatas.¹⁰

This is the earliest record of any of these places in Roman sources and reflects both diplomatic activity and conscientious recordkeeping. On this occasion Roman diplomats wanted to monitor the activity of a possible enemy. The term outpost [gr. *κάστρον*] is used to describe the cities of the Rus, which might indicate that the Roman diplomats did not regard these cities as grand metropolises.

De administrando imperio also contains the earliest description of the Rus' relationship with their Slavonic neighbours. According to the diplomatic manual:

[w]hen the month of November begins, their chiefs together with all the Russians at once leave Kiev and go off on the *poliudia*, which means "rounds", that is, to the Slavonic regions of the Vervians and Drugovichians and Krivichians and Severians and the rest of the Slavs who are tributaries of the Russians. There they are maintained throughout the winter, but then once more, starting from the month of April, when the ice of the Dnieper river melts, they come back to Kiev. They then pick up their "monoxyla", as has been said above, and fit them out, and come down to Romania.¹¹

This is the earliest description of a Rus state structure which relied on income from Slavic tributaries, previously unknown in Roman sources. Kiev is mentioned as a summer habitat of the Rus, a collection point for their export goods. However, *De administrando imperio* does not identify Kiev as a political centre, that still appears to be Novgorod.

The procedure for bringing the boats to Kiev is described earlier in the section on the Rus, as follows:

Their Slav tributaries, the so-called Krivichians and the Lenzanenes and the rest of the Slavonic regions, cut the "monoxyla" on their mountains in time of winter, and when they have prepared them, as spring approaches, and the ice melts, they bring them on to the neighbouring lakes. And since these lakes debouch into the river Dnieper, they enter thence on to this same river, and come down to Kiev, and draw the ships along to be finished and sell them to the Russians.¹²

The journey of the Rus to the Black Sea and along its west coast is then described in some detail. It is evident that the empire was now monitoring the Rus and studying their habits.

The description of the Rus' journey southward towards Constantinople holds enormous interest for historians of travel and also for philologists trying to decipher the language of the Rus through the names of waterfalls encountered on the way. However, it is also of interest as testimony to the increased interest of the imperial court in the Rus, which is parallel to the great interest shown to the raid of 941 found in various narrative sources. It seemed that the Rus were no longer seen as occasional visitors to the Black Sea, but rather as a major actor in these regions. One reason for this must have been the consolidation of the Rus at Kiev and the increasing political connection between Kiev and Novgorod. For a culture unaccustomed to paying attention to the internal affairs of barbarian tribes, the mention of Sviatoslav, son of Ingor, is a marked token of respect. The Prince of the Rus had become a force to be reckoned with.

A ROYAL VISITOR

The diplomatic efforts of Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenetos (Constantine VII) held several purposes. One of them, as evidenced by *De administrando imperio*, was to gain knowledge about the Rus, their movements, and their internal structures. The second purpose was to revive the project of Christianizing the Rus, which had evidently stagnated, despite some initial successes during the reigns of Michael III and Basil I, in the 860s and 870s. An important event concerning this was the first recorded visit of a Rus leader to Constantinople. This occurred in either 946 or 957, with the Princess (*arkhontissa*) of the Rus, Helga (OS. Olga), the mother of Prince Sviatoslav of Novgorod, as the first visitor.

Helga's visit is thoroughly described in a contemporary source, *The Book of Ceremonies*, which was commissioned by Emperor Constantine VII, and probably composed around the end of his reign, sometime between 956 and 959. According to *The Book of Ceremonies*, the visit began on 9 September and ended with a banquet on 18 October. Helga was accompanied by her nephew and other relatives, altogether a retinue containing more than hundred people.¹³

Princess Helga is also mentioned in a treaty which was made between the Roman Empire and the Rus, no later than in 944, and is only preserved in an Old Slavonic translation in the *Primary Chronicle*. There, the

princess is called Olga and is listed among the leaders of the Rus, following Igor and Sviatoslav.¹⁴ But while the treaty, as preserved in the *Primary Chronicle*, is probably of an ancient provenance, it has anachronistic features, such as mention of the city of Pereiaslavl, which was founded some decades after 944. It is thus possible that the mention of Helga is a later insertion, although her existence is confirmed by contemporary sources.

It seems that the princess was treated by her Roman hosts with exceptional consideration and honour. In *The Book of Ceremonies*, the focus is on the ceremonial of the court, but what was the significance of the visit to Helga and her retinue? Clearly, this visit was the product of conscious diplomatic effort, with the Rus interested in improving relations with the Roman Empire and testing what could be gained from a peaceful relationship. One benefit might have been increased trade, which is a subject on which Roman diplomats must have placed great emphasis, as evidenced by the elaborate description of the trade routes of the Rus in *De administrando imperio*. This might have been the subject of the emperor's discussion with the leaders of Helga's retinue.

Princess Helga's visit is mentioned in an eleventh century chronicle, the *Synopsis Historiarum* of John Skylitzes, in the following terms:

The wife of the chieftain of the Rus who had once sailed against Roman territory, Helga by name, came to Constantinople after her husband died. She was baptised and she demonstrated fervent devotion. She was honoured in a way commensurate with her devotion, then she returned home.¹⁵

The chronicler is unambiguous about the fact that Helga was baptised, which is not mentioned in *The Book of Ceremonies*. The baptism of Helga would probably have occurred before the reception on 9 September, where she was honoured as a person with a rank at the Roman court, a *zoste patrikia*. In the chronicle the emphasis is on a spiritual relationship between the Princess and the imperial court, with the key element being the adoption of Christianity.

Another reference to the Princess is to be found in the Latin chronicle of Adalbert of Trier, which calls her Helen. In 959, Adalbert tells us:

envoys from Helen, queen of the Russians, who was baptized in Constantinople in the reign of the Emperor Romanos [Romanos II, 959–63] of Constantinople, came to the king [Otto I] and falsely, as it later

became apparent, asked for a bishop and priests to be ordained for that people.¹⁶

We are not told exactly when the queen's envoys had arrived in Germany, nor where their meeting with Otto I took place. It is very likely that Queen Helen is the same person as the Princess Helga mentioned in *The Book of Ceremonies*. Helen might have been the name she received at her baptism, or is a Latin rendering of the name Helga. As Helen was also the name of the wife of Emperor Constantine VII, the former explanation seems very probable, as it suggests that the empress might have participated in the baptism as godmother to Helga. The main discrepancy then would be the statement that Helen was baptised during the reign of Romanos II, rather than earlier, as suggested by *The Book of Ceremonies* and the *Synopsis Historiarum* of Skylitzes.

The chronicler himself, Adalbert of Trier, was dispatched by Otto I to the Rus in 961. Adalbert describes the outcome of his journey to the lands of the Rus with tantalizing brevity and vagueness. He describes himself as "unable to accomplish successfully any of the purposes for which he had been sent, and seeing that he was exerting himself in vain, he returned home. While some of his companions were killed during the homeward journey, he himself escaped with great difficulty".¹⁷ He returned to Germany in 962, intending to report on the result of his mission to Otto I, but the king was in Italy, where on 2 February 962 he was crowned emperor in Rome by the pope.¹⁸

Why did Princess Helga, now calling herself Helen, request missionary bishops from Saxony? One possible reason might be expedience, as it would have been closer to Novgorod than missionaries from the Roman Empire. Another possibility is that she wanted to strengthen her relationship with King Otto. In any case, the Rus proved to be reluctant to pursue an alliance with the Saxons; perhaps they had discovered that the Latin customs were quite different from those they had encountered in Constantinople. Another reason might be that the son of Helga, Sviatoslav, had reached maturity and was less interested in the mission than his mother.

Princess Helga's diplomatic efforts did not result in a mass Christianization of the Rus, no more than the ninth-century Roman missions had. One can assume that an important reason for her conversion was to create or sustain a strategic alliance, both with the Roman Empire and the so-called Holy Roman Emperor of Saxony. This was a new approach on the part of the Rus, perhaps reflecting the lesson Princess

Helga had learned from the failed expedition of 941, or the diplomatic efforts of Emperor Constantine VII.

AN ANGRY AND SAVAGE MAN

Sometime between 980 and 1000, the historian known as Leo the Deacon composed a history of the Roman emperors who had reigned between 959 and 976. Leo had been part of the imperial retinue from an early age and became a member of the palace clergy soon after Basil II became emperor in 976. He is also known for an encomium in praise of that emperor. The 969–971 campaign against the Rus forms an important core of the narrative, featuring the son of Princess Helga, Sviatoslav, in the role of the primary antagonist. In fact, Sviatoslav is one of the main characters in Leo's historical narrative that very much focuses on individual leaders and their character traits; only the Roman emperors Nikephoros II Phokas (r. 963–969) and John Tzimiskes (r. 969–976) are described in greater detail than Sviatoslav.

Leo might actually have met Prince Sviatoslav, at peace negotiations between him and Emperor John in 971, and he presents us with a vivid description of the prince:

[the Prince] was of moderate height, neither taller than average, nor particularly short; his eyebrows were thick; he had grey eyes and a snub nose; his beard was clean-shaven, but he let the hair grow abundantly on his upper lip where it was bushy and long; and he shaved his head completely, except for a lock of hair that hung down on one side, as a mark of the nobility of his ancestry; he was solid in the neck, broad in the chest and very well-articulated in the rest of his body; he had a rather angry and savage appearance; on one ear was fastened a gold earring, adorned with two pearls with a red gemstone between them; his clothing was white, no different from that of his companions except in cleanliness.¹⁹

It is evident that the narrator was fascinated by Sviatoslav, who is actually the first Rus person described in any Roman source. An important transition had occurred in the preceding 30 years. In 941, the Rus were still as faceless and obscure as they had been in the ninth century, whereas now they had a clear appearance and were personified by this imposing individual. With Sviatoslav, the Rus step out of the obscure role previously ascribed to them in Roman sources and become both individualized and highly visible (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 The Madrid Skylitzes—Meeting between Emperor John Tzimiskes and Sviatoslav I of Kiev

Sviatoslav, the ruler of Novgorod, according to *De administrando imperio*, is described by Leo as the “ruler of the Tauroscythians” and no other clues are offered as to his residence. According to Leo’s history, Roman emperor Nikephorus II Phokas dispatched an ambassador to Prince Sviatoslav to offer him rich rewards if he would attack the Bulgarians to the north.²⁰ It is noted that Sviatoslav agreed enthusiastically to the emperor’s proposal.

Sviatoslav’s motives were probably more complex than indicated by the historian and can be seen as a continuation of Sviatoslav’s aggressive policies. At that time, the Rus seem to have been at war against the Khazars, attested by the massive conflagration layer at Samkarc in the Straits of Kerch around the mid-tenth century.²¹ The Rus also had attacked the Volga Bulgars and the Khazar strongholds in the Caspian region where, according to the Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal, who described the region in 977, “no grape or raisin remained, not a leaf on the stalk.”²² The destruction of Khazar imperial power paved the way for the Rus to move in and dominate the north-south trade routes that crossed through the steppe and across the Black Sea, routes that formerly had been a major source of revenue for the Khazars.

The Roman’s offer seems to have emboldened Sviatoslav, although the wars between the Rus and the Khazars were not mentioned by Leo the Deacon. According to Leo, Sviatoslav “was buoyed up with hopes of

wealth, and dreamed of possessing the land of the Mysians [Bulgarians]. Since in any case he was hot-headed and bold, and a brave and active man, he urged all the Taurians, from youths upwards, to join the campaign".²³ In accordance with this statement, the Rus had crossed the Danube into Bulgarian territory, defeated a Bulgarian army, and established control over Eastern and Northern Bulgaria. This seems to have occurred in the summer of 969.

In early 970, a Rus army, with large contingents of Mysians (Bulgarians), Scythians (Pechenegs), and Huns (Magyars), crossed the Balkan Mountains and headed south. The reason was, according to Leo the Deacon, that "Sphendosthlavos was very puffed up by his victories over the Mysians and swaggered insolently with barbarian arrogance (for he already held the land securely)".²⁴ Leo then relates how Emperor John Tzimiskes marshalled his forces for a campaign against the Rus. The emperor made his move in Easter week of 971 and caught the Rus by surprise. Following a hard and savage campaign, the Rus were forced to capitulate. According to Leo:

[a]lthough Sphendosthlavos grieved all night over the decimation of his army, and was distraught and seething with rage, since he was not able to prevail over an invincible army, he recognized that it was the task of an intelligent general not to fall into despair when caught in dire straits, but to endeavour to save his men in any way possible.²⁵

Therefore, Sviatoslav made an agreement in which he exchanged land and prisoners in return for his soldiers' departure and return to their own land. According to a treaty preserved within the *Primary Chronicle*, Sviatoslav pledged not to attack the empire nor its allies, invoking the pagan gods Perun and Volos.²⁶

As it turned out, Sviatoslav would not survive long after the peace settlement. After its making, he had honoured the agreement and

he sailed away with his remaining comrades, eager to return to their fatherland. But in the course of their voyage they were ambushed by the Patzinaks (they are a very numerous nomadic people, who eat lice and carry their houses with them, living for the most part in wagons), who killed almost all of them and slaughtered Sphendosthlavos himself along with the rest, so that out of such a large army of Rus' only a few returned safely to their native abodes.²⁷

The inglorious end of Sviatoslav resembles that of his father, which Leo had previously related. It also brings to mind the strategic description in *De administrando imperio*, composed a few decades earlier, which highlights the potential threat of the Pechenegs to the Rus. Sviatoslav's fate therefore actualizes the prediction made in *De administrando imperio*.

The family of Ingvar, Helga, and Sviatoslav had interacted with the Roman Empire for three decades, in both peaceful and hostile ways. Whereas Ingvar is described as a nebulous character, whose motives and exact role in the attack on the Roman Empire are far from clear, his widow and son's depictions are much more vivid, as they both personally met and negotiated with Roman emperors. Helga was clearly seeking an alliance with the empire, a strategy initially also pursued by Sviatoslav. However, Sviatoslav is portrayed as a greedy, ambitious, angry, and savage man who eventually became a threat to the Roman Empire. He is the first leader of the Rus vividly portrayed in Roman sources.

The obscure Barbarians depicted by Patriarch Photios had now revealed themselves in a human shape, as sentient beings capable of rational decisions rather than an inexplicable force of nature, sent by the almighty as a punishment for the sins of the Romans. This notable shift in rhetoric might reflect a change in attitudes as well; even if they were not friendly or reliable, the Rus were nevertheless people who could be described and understood.

NOTES

1. *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*, pp. 335–337.
2. *The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, p. 319.
3. *The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*, pp. 312–21.
4. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, p. 144.
5. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, p. 106.
6. *Quellen zur Geschichte der sächsischen Kaiserzeit*, pp. 460, 462.
7. *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century*, pp. 106–20.
8. *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate V*, pp. 67–74.
9. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *De administrando imperio*, p. 50.
10. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *De administrando imperio*, p. 56.
11. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *De administrando imperio*, p. 62.
12. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *De administrando imperio*, pp. 56, 58.
13. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *The Book of Ceremonies*, pp. 594–98.
14. PVL, pp. 23–26.
15. *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum*, p. 240.

16. *Quellen zur Geschichte der sächsischen Kaiserzeit*, p. 214.
17. *Quellen zur Geschichte der sächsischen Kaiserzeit*, pp. 216, 218.
18. See Obolensky, *Philadelphie et autres études*, pp. 159–176.
19. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, pp. 156–57.
20. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, pp. 63, 77.
21. See Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus*, p. 143.
22. Ibn Hawqal, *Kitab al-masalik wa-al-mamalik* II, p. 393.
23. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, p. 77.
24. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, p. 105.
25. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, p. 155.
26. PVL, p. 34.
27. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, p. 157.



Adaptation

A PRIMARY CONCERN

In the late 980s the relationship between the Rus and the Roman Empire took a novel turn with the Rus prince sending soldiers to the Roman Empire. This pivotal event was later perceived as the foundation of the Varangian Guard and is thus of primary importance in any tale on how the Rus became Varangians. At the time, however, there was no mention of Varangians. To describe the early history of the Rus as a part of the pre-history of the Varangians is due to the influence of a single source, which nevertheless is of much importance.

In the preceding narrative, we have viewed the Rus through the lens of Greek, Latin, and Arabic narrators. These narrators defined the Rus as the Other, sometimes hostile and prone to aggression, but sometimes peaceful and willing to submit to Roman hegemony and become Christianized. Hitherto, there has been no indication of how the Rus regarded themselves nor how they would have narrated their own history. For that perspective we only have tales from a much later time, narratives that were very much shaped by what had happened in the meantime.

For the history of the early Rus, the most popular source is also the most problematic. Several fourteenth- and fifteenth-century chronicles contain nearly identical accounts of events leading up to the early twelfth century. This originally independent text has been collated in the *Povest' vremennykh let*, commonly named the *Primary Chronicle* in English (and

also here referred to as PVL). It was probably composed in the early twelfth century, between 1113 and 1118.

The *Primary Chronicle* used some written sources, most importantly the *Chronicle of Master Symeon*, already mentioned on a few occasions as an important source for the view of the Romans regarding the Rus. The treaties of 911, 944, and 971, are included verbatim in the *Primary Chronicle*, but appear to be based on earlier written documents. These sources, probably all of them originally composed in Greek, were the main written sources for the events of the ninth and tenth century for the *Primary Chronicle*. The rest was based on oral legends which had probably become embedded in the cultural memory of the Kievan Rus, the state in which the *Primary Chronicle* was composed.

The legend begins by naming the sons of Noah and the division of the world into different nations. It is stated that “among these seventy-two nations, the Slavic race is derived from the line of Japheth, since they are the Noricians, who are identical with the Slavs”.¹ The Slavs settled beside the Danube and then scattered through the East. The chronicle then describes a visit by the Apostle Andrew to the site where Kiev was later built and the Polyanian settlement in that region.² They are depicted as having paid tribute to the Khazars.

One of the first dates listed in the chronicle is 859 when “the Varangians from beyond the sea” imposed tribute in the northern tribes.³ They were driven back but the tribes rose against each other and there was discord among them. They thus offered power to three brothers from the Rus who are described as being from a particular tribe of the Varangians: “These particular Varangians were known as Russes, just as some are called Swedes, and other Normans, English, and Gotlanders, for they were thus named”.⁴ These three brothers, Riurik, Sineus, and Truvor, established their rule in Novgorod, Beloozero, and Izborsk. The latter two brothers died and Riurik became sole ruler. Two boyars, Askold and Dir, “who did not belong to his kin” are then described as travelling down the Dnieper, settling at Kiev, and establishing their dominion over the Polianians. These boyars are then said to have carried out the attack on Constantinople, which had been described by the *Chronicle of Master Symeon*.

Even if Riurik, Askold, and Dir may have been the names of actual rulers at some time, their tales in the *Primary Chronicle* are legends. As mentioned previously, it is unlikely that Kiev was under the rule of the Rus in the ninth century, and the tale of three brothers coming from over the sea is also of a legendary nature. According to the chronicle, Riurik died in 879 and entrusted his regime to his kinsman Oleg, who was to rule on

behalf of his own son, Igor. Oleg is then described as having captured Smolensk and then Kiev. Askold and Dir were killed and “Oleg set himself up as prince in Kiev, and declared that it should be the mother of Russian cities”.⁵ This foundation narrative thus clearly reflects the interests of the rulers of Kiev in the early twelfth century. This stands in contrast to most Greek and Latin sources, in which Kiev is not mentioned as an important centre for the Rus at this early date. In *De administrando imperio* it appears only as an outpost, whereas Novgorod is presented as the capital where Prince Sviatoslav resided.

The *Primary Chronicle* describes an attack on Constantinople by Oleg in 907, followed by a treaty between the Rus and the Roman Empire, which preceded the one of 911. The attack is not mentioned in any Roman sources. The initial treaty of 907 is similar in tone to the later one but includes some anachronisms. For instance, it mentions the city of Pereiaslavl, even though the chronicle later claims that the city was founded in 993.⁶ It is thus likely that the treaty of 907 is a reconstruction based on the later treaty and some legendary material. The death of Oleg is described in a legendary manner and he is said to have been succeeded by Riurik’s son, Igor, each of them ruling for 33 years. This does not fit well with contemporary evidence which indicates that Oleg and Igor were both active in the early 940s. Even if related in the form of a chronicle, events during the reign of Oleg, Igor, and Princess Olga seem originally to have formed a part of a continuous narrative which was later made into a chronicle.⁷

Apart from the treaty of 911 and treaties made between the Rus and the Roman Empire in 944 and 971, which are probably based on copies of earlier documents, most of the events related in the first part of the *Primary Chronicle* are legendary in nature. They form a part of the cultural memory of the Rus rather than communicative memory, which would have only stretched back to 80–100 years before the earliest versions of the *Primary Chronicle* were written.

In the *Primary Chronicle* the ancestors are presented both as Us, that is, as venerable ancestors of present-day Rus, and as the Other, that is, they belong to an uncanny and sometimes unfamiliar past. The term “Varangian” is used to signify the Scandinavian rulers of Novgorod and Kiev, the ancestors of the later rulers of Kiev. Emphasis is laid on the Scandinavian origin of this dynasty, as the Varangians are described as coming from beyond the sea. Their arrival is an important part of the foundation narrative, which became embedded in the cultural memory of later generations, but the

dating of the usage of the term Varangian is uncertain and may reflect late eleventh century custom, rather than earlier tradition.

For the period of Princess Olga's rule over the Rus, her baptism is described in some detail, but the narrative seems to have been transformed into a chronicle form at a late stage. It is only with the time of Prince Sviatoslav that the PVL begins to list annual events, mainly for the years 964–972, which celebrate the conquests of the prince, and even attempt to portray him as the winner in his wars with the Roman Empire. There continue to be gaps in the chronicle until the reign of Prince of Vladimir, son of Sviatoslav, who is listed as the ruler of the Rus from 980 onward. Vladimir was the ancestor of the monarchs of Kiev, under whose aegis the *Primary Chronicle* was created as foundation documents to support the legitimacy of their rule.

As already noted, the *Primary Chronicle* is a compilation of legends which may or may not reflect actual historical events. As the narrative moves closer to the period in which it was written, we meet figures that are clearly historical, rather legendary, such as Princess Olga and Prince Sviatoslav. However, their stories are probably heavily influenced by legend. The reign of Prince Vladimir forms a transitional period, as it ended around 100 years before the composition of the *Primary Chronicle*. Thus, the narrative's depiction of Vladimir's rule hovers between legend and historical fact.

To assess how the story of Vladimir developed into how it appears in the *Primary Chronicle*, it is useful to review how Vladimir's relations with the Roman Empire were described in earlier Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Armenian narratives. From these narratives one can collect the core facts of their relationship and thus it becomes possible to make some observations about the evolution of the debate about Vladimir, and assess the particular nature of his narrative in the *Primary Chronicle*.

BASIL II AND HIS HELPERS

In the century before the composition of the *Primary Chronicle*, several sources refer to an incident in which Vladimir sent a team of warriors to the aid of the Roman Emperor Basil II. From that point on, the Rus seem to have regularly served in the armies of the Roman Empire, eventually evolving into the Varangians. Thus, the arrangement between Basil and Vladimir was the foundation of the Varangian element within the imperial

army. At the time, however, its importance was far from clear to the earliest witnesses to this event.

The earliest source which discusses this event was probably the lost *Baghdad Chronicle* of Hilal al-Sabi' (c. 970–1056), which was later used by Abu Shuja, vizier to the Abbasid caliphs, writing in the 1070s. This chronicle covers the years 979–999, from the perspective of the Abbasids. The Roman general Wardis (Bardas Phokas the Younger), the son of Leo Phokas the Younger and the nephew of the late Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas, plays a large role in this chronicle and it describes how he led the revolt against brothers and co-rulers Emperor Basil II and Emperor Constantine VIII. According to the chronicle,

[r]educed to weakness the two Emperors sent to solicit aid from the king of the Russians; he demanded their sister's hand in marriage but she refused to surrender herself to a bridegroom of a different religion; correspondence ensued which resulted in the Russian king adopting Christianity. The alliance was then contracted and the princess was given him. He sent a number of his followers to assist them, men of strength and courage. When this reinforcement had reached Constantinople, they crossed the strait in ships to meet Wardis, who despised their appearance and ironically asked how they thus ventured themselves. No sooner however had they reached the shore and got on the same terrain with the enemy than a battle commenced wherein the Russians proved themselves superior and put Wardis to death. His forces were dispersed, and the emperors once more found themselves firmly installed, and their government which had been tottering renewed its strength.⁸

In this narrative, three events are connected: the formal Christianization of the Rus, a matrimonial alliance between the rulers of the Rus and the Roman Empire, and the dispatch of a contingent of Rus to aid the Roman emperor against a usurper to the throne. The names of the protagonists, the king of the Rus and his bride, are not mentioned, and the source does not give an estimate of the number of the soldiers sent by the Rus prince.

The same event is described in another near-contemporary source: The Armenian historian Stephen of Taron, also known as Asoghik, who composed his universal chronicle in 1005. As he describes Emperor Basil II's eastern campaign in 1000, he notes: "Basil got six thousand foot-soldiers from the king of the Rus", when he gave his sister in marriage to the latter and at the time that this nation came to believe in Christ".⁹ Elements of this story are similar as to the tale in the *Baghdad Chronicle*, except that

the chronicler claims to know the size of the contingent sent by the Rus prince, although the number he mentions seems to be impossibly large.¹⁰ Stephen is, however, less precise in dating this event.

The third witness to this event is the German chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg, writing sometime between 1015 and 1017. He also briefly refers to the conversion of the Rus, in the context of his “criticism and condemnation of the wicked deeds of the king of the Russians, Vladimir”.¹¹ According to Thietmar, Vladimir:

obtained a wife, named Helena, from the Greeks. She had formerly been betrothed to Otto III, but was then denied to him, through fraud and cunning. At her instigation, Vladimir accepted the Holy Christian faith which, however, he did not adorn with righteous deeds. He was an unrestrained fornicator and cruelly assailed the feckless Greeks with acts of violence.¹²

Thietmar does not mention any military assistance connected with the matrimonial alliance between the Romans and the Rus. The main detail that he adds is the name of the Princess, of which there is a discrepancy between him and other sources. It should be noted, as mentioned earlier, that another noble lady of the Rus, Princess Helga, was also called Helena in a German source. The proposed marriage alliance between Otto III, himself the son of a Roman princess, and a Roman princess named Helena is not mentioned in other sources. However, Otto III was later betrothed to Zoe, the daughter of Basil II’s co-emperor, Constantine VIII.

The Arab-Christian historian Yahya of Antioch, who wrote his history around 1030, also connects the alliance between the Romans and the Rus to the revolt of Bardas Phokas. Yahya offers a more detailed description of the events than earlier sources. According to Yahya:

this matter had become serious, and Emperor Basil became worried about the strength of his troops, and the advantage that Bardas had over him. The coffers were empty. Out of necessity he asked the king of the Rus for help, although the Rus were his enemies. The Rus king acquiesced, and the two of them contracted a marriage alliance. The Rus king married the sister of Basil on the condition that he would be baptized along with his whole people. The vast nation of the Rus did not have a law at that time nor did they have a religion, and so Basil sent him metropolitans and bishops who baptized the king and all his people. Basil sent his sister to the Rus king at the same time, and she built many churches in the land of the Rus. When the matter of the marriage was settled between Basil and the Rus king, Rus

troops arrived and joined the soldiers of ar-Rum who were with King Basil. All of the soldiers betook themselves by land and by sea to meet Bardas Phocas at Chrysopolis. They defeated Phocas, and Basil took possession of the coast and he captured the ships which had been in the hands of Phocas.¹³

The basic details mentioned in this source are the same as in the *Baghdad Chronicle*. Neither the King of the Rus nor his princess are named. However, according to Yahya, the conversion of the Rus did not just involve the ruler, but rather the whole population. It also emphasizes the importance of the un-named Roman princess for the introduction of Christianity to the Rus. Yahya later mentions that the Rus troops were a part of the army that travelled with Basil II to attack Fatimid outposts in Northern Syria in 999. He describes them burning a church at Homs in which local inhabitants had sought sanctuary.¹⁴

The earliest Roman source with information concerning Vladimir's expedition is the *Chronographia* of Michael Psellos, a historical account of fourteen Roman rulers between 976 and 1077, of which Basil II is the earliest depicted. Psellos mentions "Scythian" mercenaries who served the emperor, but does not connect them with the Christianization of the Rus or a matrimonial alliance between the Roman Empire and the Rus. According to Psellos, Emperor Basil II was able to resist the rebellion of Bardas Phocas because:

not long before this a picked band of Scythians had come to help him from the Taurus, and a fine body of men they were. He had these men trained, combined with them another mercenary force, divided by companies, and sent them out to fight the rebels. They came upon the insurgents unexpectedly, when they were off their guard seated at table and drinking, and after they had destroyed not a few of them, scattered the rest in all directions.¹⁵

Psellos does not place this band of Scythians in the context of any Rus-Roman relations. However, he does emphasize their status as a group within the Roman army, although integrated into a larger body of mercenaries.

The earliest Roman source which connects Emperor Basil II and Prince Vladimir is the chronicle of John Skylitzes. The Rus are mentioned in connection with the rebellion of Bardas Phocas, when describing how Emperor Basil II managed to recapture the city of Chrysopolis, opposite the capital, from a general in the service of Bardas. According to Skylitzes:

the emperor fitted out some ships by night and embarked some Russians in them, for he had been able to enlist allies among the Russians and he had made their leader, Vladimir, his kinsman by marrying him to his sister, Anna. He crossed with the Russians, attacked the enemy without a second thought and easily subdued them.¹⁶

Skylitzes is the earliest source, other than Thietmar of Merseburg, to mention the names of the Rus ruler and the Roman princess. However, he offers a different name for the sister of Emperor Basil II than Thietmar of Merseburg. Skylitzes makes no reference to the conversion of the Rus to Christianity nor of the part the Roman princess played in that.

From these various late tenth- and eleventh century narratives some core facts emerge. The first is the marriage alliance between the ruling house of the Roman Empire and the Kingdom of the Rus, which seems to have been indirectly connected to the second important element, a shipment of Rus warriors to the Roman Empire, apparently during the civil war between Emperor Basil II and Bardas Phokas. The third part of the tale is the Rus conversion to Christianity, made possible by this alliance and especially by the efforts of the Princess who had been sent to marry the Prince of the Rus. None of the narratives go beyond these core facts or delve into the political situation in the Kingdom of the Rus at the time. Explanation of that issue has been left to native sources, composed at a considerably later time.

THE LEGEND OF VLADIMIR

As is apparent from the previous narratives, very little is said about Prince Vladimir in the narratives which mention the alliance between the Roman Empire and the Rus during his reign. The main exception is the chronicle of Thietmar of Merseburg, which makes much of Vladimir's cruelty and generally wicked character. Thus, it is not stated in any of these sources whether Vladimir resided at Novgorod, as his father had done, or whether he resided at Kiev, as stated in the *Primary Chronicle*.

There is, however, archaeological evidence to suggest that the Rus' southward turn had become more noticeable in the reign of Vladimir. Before the last quarter of the tenth century, Kiev had been a collection of small settlements with a marginal presence of Scandinavians. The only other large settlement in the southern steppe was Chernigov on the Desna, also mentioned in *De Administrando imperio*. In the last decades of the

tenth century, however, there was a marked increase in settlement at various sites in this southern region, and also in Kiev itself. Thus, this trading outpost was evidently gaining in political importance.¹⁷

The earliest dated example of Old East Slavic (Church Slavonic with pronounced East Slavic interference) must be considered the written *Sermon on Law and Grace* (OS. *Слово о законѣ и благодѣти*) by Hilarion, who was metropolitan of Kiev around 1050. This sermon includes a panegyric on Prince Vladimir which conforms to the precepts of the Roman eloquence. According to Hilarion:

Rome, with the voices of praise, praises Peter and Paul, for through Peter and Paul Rome came to believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God. Asia and Ephesus and Patmos praise John the Theologian. India praises Thomas, Egypt praises Mark: every land and every city and every nation honors and glorifies its teacher that taught it the Orthodox faith. We too, therefore, let us praise to the best of our strength, with our humble praises, him whose deeds were wondrous and great, our teacher and guide, the great kagan of our land, Volodimer, the grandson of Igor' of old, and the son of the glorious Svjatoslav. When these reigned in their time, their renown spread abroad for their courage and valor; and still they are remembered, renowned even now for their victories and might. For they ruled not some feeble, obscure, unknown land, but in this land of Rus', which is known and renowned to the ends of the earth.¹⁸

Hilarion goes on to mention “the holy Church of Holy Mary Mother of God, founded by you on foundations of faith and now the abode of your earthly remains which await the archangels' last trumpet.”¹⁹ He also mentions Vladimir's son George (Гюрьги; the baptismal name of his son, Iaroslav) “whom God made heir to your rule after you; who does not demolish what you established, but rather strengthens it; who does not diminish your deeds of devotion, but rather embellishes them; who does not impair, but repairs; for he finished your unfinished works.”²⁰ He mentions “the great temple of God's Holy Wisdom” built by George/Iaroslav, a church which “is admired and renowned in all surrounding lands, for none such can be found within the bounds of the north of the earth, from the east to the west. And he swathed your city of Kiev in splendor, as though in a crown”.²¹ Hilarion then utters the following exhortation:

Arise and behold your son Georgij! Behold your offspring! Behold him whom you loved! Behold him whom the Lord brought forth from your

loins! Behold him who adorns the throne of your land, and so rejoice and be exceeding glad. Behold, too, your devout daughter-in-law Irina! Behold your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren! Behold how they live, how they are sustained by the Lord, how they are maintaining the faith, as you had ordained! Behold how they frequent the holy churches! Behold how they glorify Christ, how they worship His name! Behold also the city, shining in splendor! Behold churches blossoming! Behold Christianity growing! Behold the glittering city, illumined with icons of saints and scented with incense, resounding with praises and songs to the Lord! Behold all this! And having beheld, rejoice and be exceeding glad, and praise the good Lord, the creator of all you behold!²²

Even if the information in this sermon seems scant, it is in fact the earliest text which clearly identifies the leaders of the Rus with the city of Kiev, and associates them with monumental works built there.

In the *Primary Chronicle*, the story of the conversion of the Rus is an amalgamation of different tales. One, which is obviously legendary in nature, tells of representatives of four different faiths, The Muslims, The Jews, The Latin Christians, and The Greeks, vying for the allegiance of Vladimir and the Rus. Vladimir, while clearly most impressed with the Greeks, leaves the issue undecided. Another tale revolves around Vladimir's siege and capture of the city of Korsun (Cherson) in Crimea. Following this triumph, Vladimir asked Emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII for the hand of their sister, threatening to besiege Constantinople if they did not yield to his wishes. The emperors decided to accept this proposal and sent their sister to him on the condition that Vladimir would be baptised. This, however, did not happen until after Vladimir had been struck with blindness and then miraculously cured. He then delivered the city back to the emperor as a wedding gift to the princess.²³ This seems to be a foundation legend meant to explain "the capture of Cherson by the Tauroscythians", an event which Leo the Deacon indicates occurred during the rebellion of Bardas Phokas and in the year of a sighting of Halley's Comet, that is, 989.²⁴ It also assigns Vladimir the initiative in requesting a marriage alliance with the Roman emperor, instead of being recruited as an ally in exchange for military assistance. The story of the 6000 mercenaries sent by Vladimir to aid Basil II against Bardas Phokas, however, is not mentioned in the *Primary Chronicle*.

ENTER THE VARANGIANS

In the eleventh century, a new term, Varangian, increased in use. It can be found in various Arab sources, by authors such as al-Biruni, and in Roman sources, such as the chronicle of Skylitzes. As noted before, the term occurs often in the *Primary Chronicle*, which credits the foundation of the kingdoms in Novgorod and Kiev to these Varangians. However, the term seems to be a novel invention at the time.

In the treaty of 911, which had been inserted into the *Primary Chronicle* at some point, there is a list of Prince Oleg's retainers. None of the names listed are Slavonic, but the list was much mutilated in transmission and all or most of them can be reduced to Scandinavian originals without violating their present textual form. In the account of Oleg's expedition in the *Primary Chronicle*, which included the attack on Constantinople in 907, there is a clear distinction between the Rus and the Slavs, but the later treaty addition designates the whole expedition as Rus. Thus, a distinction was created in the eleventh century which may not have existed earlier. No mention is made of Varangians in the treaty of 911, nor are they mentioned in the treaty ascribed to the year 944, which follows more or less the same conventions. As these documents seem to have been composed well before the *Primary Chronicle*, their vocabulary might be indicative of earlier practice. Thus, as far as can be ascertained, there was no particular distinction made between the Rus and the Slavs in the kingdoms of Oleg and Igor, and the term Varangian does not occur in those parts of the *Primary Chronicle* that are based on documents of an early provenance. It is probably a later invention, but what was its function?

According to al-Biruni, the Warank are a people who live in the northernmost reaches beyond the seventh clime, or part of the world. They have a sea, which is connected to the sea encircling the Earth and passes through the lands of the Slavs (Saqaliba) and approaches the land of the Bulgars. Al-Biruni mentions that the Warank live as far north as Thule (Thwly) and are more like wild beasts than men. The Warank and the Rus are also located on a map in the principal manuscript of this work.²⁵

This geographical delimitation of the lands of the Warank, who are not connected with a specific military unit in the Roman army, fits reasonably well with the account of the *Primary Chronicle*. It is noteworthy that the use of the term in both these sources is almost identical to how the term Rus is used in earlier sources.

What was this reason for this change in appellation? One possible explanation is that the term Rus was gaining a new significance with the consolidation of the Kievan state under Vladimir and his successor, Iaroslav. This was a state in which the Scandinavian element was no longer dominant. Thus, a new designation for the Scandinavians within the principality of the Rus was invented, a term which became an integral part of the foundation legend of the state, as narrated in the *Primary Chronicle*.

NOTES

1. PVL, p. 8.
2. PVL, p. 9.
3. PVL, p. 13.
4. PVL, p. 13.
5. PVL, p. 14.
6. PVL, p. 55.
7. See Zuckerman, "On the Date of the Khazars' Conversion", pp. 259–63.
8. *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate* VI, pp. 118–19.
9. Stephen (Asolik) of Taron, *Histoire universelle* II, pp. 164–65; see Poppe, "How the Conversion of Rus' Was Understood in the Eleventh Century", p. 292.
10. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 90–96.
11. Thietmar von Merseburg, *Chronik*, p. 432.
12. Thietmar von Merseburg, *Chronik*, pp. 432, 434.
13. *Histoire de Yahya-ibn-Sa'id d'Antioche* II, pp. 423–26.
14. *Histoire de Yahya-ibn-Sa'id d'Antioche* II, p. 458.
15. Psellos, *Chronographie* I, p. 9.
16. *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum*, p. 336.
17. Franklin and Shepard, *The Emergence of the Rus*, pp. 169–75.
18. *Metropoliten Ilarion Lobrede auf Vladimir den Heiligen*, pp. 99–101.
19. *Des Metropoliten Ilarion Lobrede auf Vladimir den Heiligen*, pp. 120–21.
20. *Des Metropoliten Ilarion Lobrede auf Vladimir den Heiligen*, p. 121.
21. *Des Metropoliten Ilarion Lobrede auf Vladimir den Heiligen*, p. 123.
22. *Des Metropoliten Ilarion Lobrede auf Vladimir den Heiligen*, p. 126.
23. PVL, pp. 39–54.
24. *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae libri decem*, p. 175.
25. Biruni, *The Book of Instruction*, pp. 124, 139.



Adventurer

THE KING OF THE VARANGIANS

From the days of Basil II onwards, there seems to have been a body of Scandinavians serving in the Roman army. In the eleventh century these soldiers started to go by the name of Varangians, which, by the time of the composition of the *Primary Chronicle*, had evolved into an ethnonym for the Scandinavian element among the Rus. In the late eleventh century, however, Roman authors seem to have used this ethnonym differently.

The so-called *Oration of Admonition for the Emperor* (Gr. Λόγος νουθετητικός προς Βασιλέα) was composed between 1075 and 1078 and is a manual on warfare and the handling of public and domestic affairs. Its author offers advice, based on his own personal experience and drawing upon numerous historical examples from the events of the eleventh century. In this tome there is the following anecdote about a Scandinavian adventurer who had served three Roman emperors:

Araltes [ON. Haraldr], son of the king of the Varangians [Gr. βασιλέως μὲν Βαραγγίας ἦν υἱός], had a brother Ioulavos [ON. Ólafr]. After his father's death the latter took the father's royal power, placing his brother Araltes second to him in authority. But he, being still a lad, determined to visit the most blessed Emperor Michael the Paphlagonian, to pay his respects and to see for himself what Roman life was like. He brought with him a company of five hundred men of good family.

He arrived there, and the emperor received him with proper courtesy and dispatched him with his force to Sicily, for a Roman army was engaged there in battle for the island. Araltes reached the island and accomplished great deeds of valour. [...] After the passing of the Emperor Michael and of his nephew who had succeeded him, Araltes wished in the time of the Emperor Monomachos to get royal permission to return to his own land, but it was not forthcoming. Indeed, the road out was obstructed. Yet he slipped away and took the throne in his own country in place of his brother Ioulavos. And he did not complain about the titles manglavites or spatharokandidates he had been honoured with; but instead, as king he showed good faith and brotherly love towards the Romans.¹

As clearly stated in this narrative, the author had served alongside Haraldr, and he connects him with known military expeditions of the empire, in Sicily (1038–1041) and against the Bulgarians (1041). Haraldr seems to have served the emperor as an independent associate, with his company of five hundred. Nevertheless, he accepted the imperial titles and rank and seems to have needed the permission of the emperor to leave the army. The main tension between Haraldr and the emperor is due to his desertion from service, although the author makes it clear that Haraldr maintained a good relationship with the Roman Empire after he succeeded his brother as “King of the Varangians”.

The *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium* by Adam of Bremen, a German source composed at the same time as the *Oration of Admonition*, refers to the brothers Haroldus (ON. Haraldr) and Olaph (ON. Ólafr) in such terms that it seems evident that these are the same persons involved. Here they appear as Kings of Norway. According to Adam, Ólafr was elected as King of Norway following the death of Suein (ON. Sveinn), who had ruled both Denmark and Norway. This was contested by Chnud (ON. Knútr), who inherited his father’s kingdom in Denmark, and there was constant war between Ólafr and Knútr. Finally, Knútr managed to chase Ólafr from the throne. Ólafr then sought to reconquer Norway with the assistance of forces from Sweden and Iceland, but was killed in the process.² However, following the deaths of Knútr and of his short-lived successor Sveinn, Magnús, the son of Ólafr, was elected King of Norway and he managed to conquer Denmark as well.³ No brother of Ólafr features in the narrative until after the death of Magnús.

It is then related how Haraldr, the brother of the king and martyr Ólafr, had left his brother while the latter was still alive and went to Constantinople, where he fought against Saracens at sea and Scythians in the interior.

When Haraldr returned to Norway, his cousin Magnús seems to have died and a nephew of Knútr, Sveinn the son of Wolf (ON. Sveinn Úlfsson), had become ruler of Denmark and Norway. Sveinn is called a kinsman of Haraldr, although their exact family relationship is not stated. Haraldr accepted his father's kingdom from Sveinn, in the rank of a duke, but after he returned to Norway and was ensured of the faith of his subjects, he began a war against the Danes, which became as long-lasting as had been between Ólafr and Knútr.⁴

Although there is no major disagreement between the *Oration of Admonition* and Adam of Bremen, the latter seems to imply that Haraldr's sojourn in Constantinople was longer than had been indicated by the author of the Oration. According to the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium*, Haraldr was abroad for the last part of the reign of Ólafr, the reign of Knútr and his son Sveinn, the reign of Magnús Ólafsson, and the short-lived reign of Sveinn Úlfsson in Norway. Following the chronology of Adam of Bremen's work this would add up to 15–20 years, and Haraldr would have left Norway before the death of his brother in 1030. Thus, he would have had to have spent some time elsewhere before coming to Constantinople during the reign of Michael IV the Paphlagonian (Fig. 1), which began in 1034.

According to the *Oration of Admonition*, Haraldr brought a company of 500 men to Constantinople. If this army had accompanied him all the way from Norway, a possible reason for this would have been his brother's exile from Norway, during which Haraldr might have wanted to seek his



Fig. 1 The Madrid Skylitzes (Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid, MS Graecus Vitr. 26-2)—Michael IV and the Bulgarian army

fortune on his own. However, the circumstances of his journey to Constantinople are not made clear by either the *Oration of Admonition* or Adam of Bremen.

As Haraldr is son of “the king of the Varangians” in the *Oration of Admonition*, it raises questions concerning his relationship with the Scandinavians who were already present in Constantinople, going back to the company sent by Prince Vladimir during the time of Emperor Basil II. Was there a regular “Varangian Guard” in Constantinople which Haraldr joined on his arrival, or was Haraldr’s company separate from the Scandinavians already present in Constantinople? The terminology used by the *Oration of Admonition* might be taken to indicate that Haraldr’s company was regarded as a part of a group of Varangians which were serving the Roman emperor at this time. Conversely, the term “Varangian” might have had a more general meaning, as an appellation for any Scandinavian who did not belong to the principality of Rus.

THE THUNDERBOLT OF THE NORTH

Adam of Bremen was far from a neutral observer of Scandinavian politics. He had personally met King Sveinn Úlfsson and used him as a key source for his history of the Scandinavian kingdoms. In contrast, Adam took a dim view of Sveinn’s nemesis, King Haraldr. He draws a vivid picture of the iniquities committed by Haraldr and describes him as an enemy of Christians:

King Harold surpassed all the madness of tyrants in his savage wildness. Many churches were destroyed by that man; many Christians were tortured to death by him. But he was a mighty man and renowned for the victories he had previously won in many wars with barbarians in Greece and in the Scythian regions. After he came into his fatherland, however, he never ceased from warfare; he was the thunderbolt of the north, a pestilence to all the Danish isles.⁵

Adam lays particular emphasis on the Haraldr’s opposition to Adalbert, the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, who wanted to maintain the supremacy of his see over the whole of Scandinavia. He considered King Haraldr to be disobedient:

For these reasons the archbishop inflamed with zeal for God, sent his legates to the king, rebuking him by letter for his tyrannical presumption. In particular, however, did the prelate reprimand him about the offerings, which it was not lawful to appropriate to the use of laymen, and about the bishops whom he had unlawfully consecrated in Gaul or in England, in contempt of the archbishop himself, who by authority of the Apostolic See should rightly have consecrated them.⁶

According to Adam, Haraldr was so enraged by these legates that he threw them out of Norway and declared that there would be no other ecclesiastical authority in the country other than himself. It seems that Haraldr was supported by his bishops, as Adam mentions a letter from Pope Alexander II which was addressed to them as well. It is evident that, in the mind of Adam, Haraldr's insubordination towards the pope and the archbishop made him an enemy of Christianity, but this would hardly have been the view of Haraldr, who held a different view of the function of these institutions.

At that time secular and ecclesiastical politics were closely interwoven, and each actor involved, the Kings of Denmark and Norway and the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, had their own interests and priorities. Even if Archbishop Adalbert and King Sveinn were allies in their struggle against King Haraldr, their interests were not always aligned and the king had been lobbying to obtain a native-born archbishop for Denmark, starting the process that led to the founding of the Archbishopric in Lund in 1104. The distinctions drawn by the contemporary witnesses can be misleading. Even if Adam paints a dark picture of Haraldr, in contrast to his saintly brother Ólafr, the discrepancy between their ecclesiastical politics was not so great, as Ólafr had also followed the practice of appointing bishops from England instead of following the guidance of the archbishop in all matters. Adam seems to have felt at greater liberty to criticize Haraldr than his saintly brother, whose transgressions were, in any case, long in the past.

What role, if any, did Haraldr's "brotherly love" towards the Roman Empire play in this complex political situation? Adam does not mention their relationship nor does he imply that Haraldr tried to introduce the customs of the Roman Empire rather than of the Latin West. In fact, the only person he discusses as an adherent of Greek ecclesiastic customs is Archbishop Adalbert, who at three masses used "another Roman or Greek tradition" and had, according to Adam, a love for the Greeks "whom he

sought also to imitate in dress and manners”⁷ Adam, however, mentions no such imitation on the part of King Haraldr.

The greatest novelty in statecraft which can be attributed to Haraldr is his issue of coinage on a large scale, which was continued by his successors. Before his time, however, the issue of coins by Norwegian kings had been sporadic and the coins had been imitations of Anglo-Saxon models. Haraldr, on the other hand, increased the scope of monetization and issued newly designed coins. Haraldr also seems to have attempted to establish a monopoly over the coins in circulation. Both Haraldr and his Danish counterpart, Sveinn Úlfsson, used debased currency, which was not common in Europe at the time, with the exception of the Roman Empire. They were able to do this only due to the monopolization of coinage within their kingdoms.

It seems that both Haraldr and Sveinn looked to the Roman Empire as a model for a more centralized administration, exemplified by their establishing a national monopoly on coinage. Both of these rulers imitated the design of Roman coins, a practice which had been initiated by the Swedish king Ólafr in the early eleventh century. There is, however, a difference between Sveinn and Haraldr’s imitations, as the former issued coins that are copy of Roman models, whereas Haraldr did not imitate specific coins, but Roman coins in general, thus demonstrating a conscious appropriation of the image of empire. Therefore, he copied both the imagery and the idea of a monetary system, in order to solidify his rule and create a more stable kingdom. It seems that his rival Sveinn Úlfsson tried to learn from the Roman Empire in different ways, in copying the looks of Roman coins in order to make use of their symbolic capital.⁸

Haraldr of Norway and Sveinn of Denmark thus both represent a new type of a Scandinavian king. They were both adventurers who continued the practice of earlier Viking rulers of creating a North Sea empire. Both sought to rule Denmark and Norway simultaneously and both held designs on the English crown. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Haraldr mounted a large-scale invasion of England in 1066, as he arrived with a fleet of 300 ships and conquered York, but, following initial success, the mission ended with his defeat and death in battle.⁹ The failure of Haraldr to conquer England can be taken as the signal of the end of the Viking Age. The priorities of the Scandinavian kings were about to change.

However, in respect of their administration of their kingdoms, Haraldr and Sveinn both went beyond the practice of earlier kings and attempted to create strong national monarchies. The model for this seems to have

come from the Roman Empire, and Haraldr, in particular, seems to have been an avid student of the practices of the empire which he had studied first-hand. As a king he not only showed “good faith and brotherly love towards the Romans”, he actively imitated them in order to strengthen his own position and that of his kingdom.

THE LAST EXPEDITION

The mystery of King Haraldr’s location in the period between his brother’s exile (c. 1028) and his own arrival in Constantinople (between 1034 and 1038) remains unsolved. There is no connection between Haraldr and the Rus mentioned either in the *Oration of Admonition* or in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium*. Thus, it is unclear whether Haraldr brought his company through the lands of the Rus or by sea through the Straits of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean, a route favoured by Scandinavian armed pilgrims in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In some of the later manuscripts of the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium* there is a note (*scholion*) which states that, following his return from Constantinople, Haraldr married the daughter of the King of Rus, Gerzlef (Iaroslav). Apart from this, Iaroslav is only mentioned once in Adam’s narrative, when it says that he married Ingrad (ON. Ingiríðr), the daughter of King Ólafr of Sweden. Thus, there is no connection made between Haraldr and Iaroslav in the Adam’s original version.

According to the *Primary Chronicle*, Iaroslav became Prince of Novgorod around 1012, and in 1036 he became “sole ruler in the land of Rus”, where he reigned until his death in 1054.¹⁰ As we have seen, he is the ruler who is called George in the *Sermon on Law and Grace* by Metropolitan Hilarion. The *Primary Chronicle* claims that in 1015 Iaroslav, fearing an attack from his father Vladimir, “sent overseas and imported Varangian reinforcements”, which might provide some context to his marriage to the daughter of the Swedish king.¹¹ In 1030, the *Primary Chronicle* mentions a war between Iaroslav and the Fenno-Ugric Chud and, in 1031, a campaign by Iaroslav and his brother Mstislav against Poland, following the death of King Boleslaw.¹² No mention is made of Varangians participating in either of these wars, although the description of them in the *Primary Chronicle* is rather laconic.

In 1036, soon after he had become sole ruler of the Rus, Iaroslav again had need of Varangian reinforcements, following an attack by the Pechenegs:

While Yaroslav was still at Novgorod, news came to him that the Pechenegs were besieging Kiev. He then collected a large army of Varangians and Slavs, returned to Kiev, and entered his city. The Pechenegs were innumerable. Yaroslav made a sally from the city and marshalled his forces, placing the Varangians in the centre, the men of Kiev on the right flank, and the men of Novgorod on the left. When they had taken position before the city, the Pechenegs advanced, and they met on the spot where the metropolitan church of St. Sophia now stands. At that time, as a matter of fact, there were fields outside the city. The combat was fierce, but toward evening Yaroslav with difficulty won the upper hand. The Pechenegs fled in various directions, but as they did not know in what quarter to flee, they were drowned, some in the Setoml', some in other streams, while the remnant of them disappeared from that day to this.¹³

This campaign against the Pechenegs, who are often called Scythians in Greek sources, might indeed be the war "in the Scythian regions" referred to in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium*.¹⁴ However, it is implied earlier in Adam of Bremen's narrative that Haraldr had fought against the Scythians during his sojourn in Constantinople with the Roman Emperor.¹⁵ It is thus far from certain that Haraldr was involved in Iaroslav's campaign against the Pechenegs.

A familial connection between Haraldr and Prince Iaroslav is possible, and it is equally possible that Haraldr had served Iaroslav before he went to Constantinople. However, this depends on the validity of the aforementioned scholion, which is the earliest source to mention such a relationship. However, it is possible that some of the scholia added to Adam's work can be traced to a very early editor of the work, perhaps even Adam himself, especially those found in many versions of his work. This criterion applies to the scholion in question, which may therefore be considered a near-contemporary source, albeit with some reservations.

Haraldr's alliance with Prince Iaroslav might not have been easy to reconcile with his alliance with the Roman emperor. In 1043 the Rus attacked Constantinople, for the first time since a contingent of Rus warriors had been sent to Basil II in 989. According to Skylitzes, there had been "a quarrel in Constantinople with certain Scyth traders, a conflict arose from this and a certain famous Scyth was slain". The ruler of this people took the incident badly, because he was by nature "an impetuous man, and very indulgent towards his passions".¹⁶ Skylitzes calls the leader of the Rus as Vladimir, but according to the *Primary Chronicle* that was the name of a son of Iaroslav, whom he had appointed leader of the

expedition.¹⁷ Skylitzes also relates that Vladimir recruited many warriors from the northern islands of the ocean, that is, Scandinavia. Later on, Skylitzes says that Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, the one who had denied King Haraldr leave to return to his homeland, regarded the war's cause "a trivial matter" which did not justify a military expedition by the Rus.¹⁸ Psellos also describes the incident in his *Chronographia* and regards the attack as unjustified, as Constantine had not been hostile towards the Rus. According to him, the attack arose from the nature of the Rus who "are the whole time raving and have raged against the empire of the Romans, and on each of the occasions they have made up this or that as a reason and have made it the pretext for war against us".¹⁹ Michael Attaleiates supports Psellos' account, in that he states that the Roman authorities were unprepared, as this invasion was unforeseen.²⁰

The reasons for the attack are secondary to our purposes here. The important fact is that, according to Skylitzes, Scandinavians took part in this attack. Haraldr, as the son-in-law of Iaroslav might have had personal connections in this expedition, whether he was already married to Iaroslav's daughter at the time, or if this only happened later, presumably in recognition of some previous relationship between the in-laws. However, this hardly seems reconcilable with the statement made in the *Oration of Admonition* concerning Haraldr's long-term friendship with the Roman Empire. If we take that source at face value, one must assume that Haraldr was not directly or indirectly involved in the attack on Constantinople, despite any previous or subsequent relationship with Iaroslav's family.

It is, however, more likely that the Rus attack on Constantinople was the reason that Haraldr was considered suspect and denied leave by Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos. As the *Oration of Admonition* implies, these suspicions must have been proved unjustified in the end, as Haraldr had served the Emperor well and would remain the friend and ally of the Roman Empire. His hasty departure from Constantinople would then be directly connected with the tension prevalent in the city during the attack of the Rus, and its aftermath.

THE VARANGIANS OF CONSTANTINOPLE

The Scandinavian contingent in Constantinople is not mentioned in contemporary accounts of the adventures of King Haraldr, and it is not clear whether the remnants of the force sent by Prince Vladimir to the Roman Empire in 989 had any role to play in his expeditions in Sicily or against

the Bulgarians and Scythians. The early history of this contingent is nebulous, and it is not certain what role the Scandinavians played in the Roman army following their arrival at the Basil II's side in 989. Even if there were Scandinavians serving the Roman emperor, it is far from evident that they formed a distinct military unit before the period of the Komnenian dynasty.²¹

The earliest incident in which “Varangians” are mentioned as group within the Roman army is to be found in the chronicle of John Skylitzes and refers to events which occurred in 1034, shortly before Haraldr's arrival in Constantinople. Skylitzes tells how the Varangians disposed of their own justice (Fig. 2):

There were some Varangians dispersed in the Thrakesion theme for the winter. One of them coming across a woman of the region in the wilderness put the quality of her virtue to the test. When persuasion failed he resorted to violence, but she seized his Persian-type sword, struck him in the heart and promptly killed him. When the deed became known in the surrounding area, the Varangians held an assembly and crowned the woman, presenting her with all the possessions of her violator, whom they threw aside, unburied, according to the law concerning suicides.²²

Later on, however, Skylitzes calls the Varangians “a Celtic people serving the Romans as mercenaries”, so that he does not seem to have associated them with Scandinavians in particular and certainly not with Scythians, as had been typical for the Rus.²³



Fig. 2 The Madrid Skylitzes (Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid, MS Græcus Vitr. 26-2)—A Thrakesian woman kills a Varangian guard

Skylitzes is also an important witness to the continuing tradition of Scandinavians coming from the lands of the Rus to serve the Roman emperor. He relates how, following the death of Anna, the sister of the Emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII, and her husband Prince Vladimir, “a man named Chrysocheir, a relative of his, embarked with a company of eight hundred men and came to Constantinople, ostensibly to serve as mercenaries”.²⁴ However, on their arrival in Constantinople, Chrysocheir and his men were unwilling to lay down their arms and, following some raids in Asia Minor, they were destroyed by the Roman army. This episode demonstrates how Rus soldiers continued to come to the Roman Empire, although, in this case, the most noteworthy thing about the episode was its failure.

Following Haraldr’s departure to Norway, references to Varangians in Roman sources become more frequent. They seem to have been involved in major expeditions that took place during the reign of Constantine IX Monomachos. According to Skylitzes, in 1052, a unit of Varangians and Normans was called upon to defend the imperial fortress in Armenia against Seljuk raids.²⁵ During the rebellion of Isaac Komnenos in 1057, both armies seem to have had Scandinavian warriors on their side. The precise function of these warriors is not made clear in the sources.²⁶

Scandinavians also seem to have formed a part of the imperial troops in Constantinople. However, they are not usually referred to as Varangians when in this function, but by such as terms as “the Barbarians with axes on their shoulders”.²⁷ Michael Psellos refers to “Scyths from the Taurus” as a part of the palace guard in his description of the revolt of 1042, a term he also uses to describe the contingent sent to the aid of Basil II in 989.²⁸ According to Anna Komnena, the Varangians “regarded their loyalty to the Emperors and their protection of the imperial persons as a pledge and ancestral tradition, handed down from father to son, which they keep inviolate, and will certainly not listen to even the slightest word about treachery”.²⁹ The service of Varangians in the imperial bodyguard seems to have been regarded as a hallowed tradition in Anna’s time.

The historian Michael Attaleiates relates how Emperor Nikephoros III Botaniates (r. 1078–1081) and his secretary were once attacked on a staircase by “the foreign men who guard the palace”. The Emperor defended himself ably and was helped by some courtiers until men from another company came to his aid. Most of the soldiers were pardoned, although the most recalcitrant of the attackers were sent away to distant garrisons outside the city after they “were convicted by their own compatriots as

well as by the judgment and the inquiry conducted by the emperor”.³⁰ This underlines the independence of the Scandinavians at the court of the Roman emperor, who seem to have held on to their own system of justice.

A certain Namphites is depicted as commander of the Varangians early in the reign of Alexios I Komnenos and led the Varangians against the Normans in the attack on Dyrrachion by Robert Guiscard in 1082. The identity of Namphites is obscure, although the name is probably a Scandinavian appellation, such as Nábítr (“biter of corpses”).³¹ Apart from King Haraldr, this Nábítr is the most well-known Scandinavian in the service of the Roman Empire in the eleventh century.

However, at that time the terms Varangians did not refer only to Scandinavians. Following the Norman invasion of England in 1066, the Scandinavian element of the Roman army was combined with Anglo-Saxons who had sought their luck in the Roman Empire. The historian Orderic Vitalis refers to some Anglo-Saxons “who were still in the flower of their youth [and] travelled into remote lands and bravely offered their arms to Alexios, emperor of Constantinople” (Alexios Komnenos, r. 1081–1118). Later on, Orderic adds that Alexios had “received into his trust the English who had left England after the slaughter of King Harold ... and had sailed across the sea to Thrace. He openly entrusted his principal palace and royal treasures to their care, even making them guards of his own person and all his possessions”.³² Orderic indicates that the English came to dominate the emperor’s personal bodyguard during the early years of Alexios’ reign, although there still could have been Scandinavian Varangians fighting outside of the city.³³

In a chrysobull issued by the emperor in 1060, the foreign mercenaries serving in the imperial army are listed as Varangians, Rus, Saracens, and Franks. Varangians thus form a group distinct from the Rus and the Franks, whom they had been confused with in earlier times. In a chrysobull from 1079, Bulgarians and Kulpingians were added to the list, and a chrysobull issued by Emperor Alexios in 1088 also included English, Germans, Alans, and Abasgians. The Rus and Varangians are still listed first but it is clear that their position in service of the emperor was far from unique.³⁴

If there ever was a purely Scandinavian “Varangian Guard” in Constantinople it did not last a long time. By the end of the eleventh century, the Scandinavian Varangians had, to a large degree, been supplanted

by Anglo-Saxons and several other foreign regiments had joined as well. However, this period had become ensconced in the cultural memory of Scandinavians, with important ramifications. The Varangian legend had been born.

NOTES

1. *Cecaumeni Strategicon*, p. 97; transl. Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings*, bls. 104.
2. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 290, 296, 298, 300.
3. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, p. 318.
4. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 340, 342.
5. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, p. 346.
6. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, p. 348.
7. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 362, 366.
8. Cf. Gullbekk, “Myntvesenet som kilde til statsutvikling”; Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 351–358.
9. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*. 6. MS D, p. 80.
10. PVL, p. 66.
11. PVL, p. 58.
12. PVL, p. 65.
13. PVL, p. 67.
14. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, p. 346.
15. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, p. 340.
16. *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum*, p. 430.
17. PVL, p. 67.
18. *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum*, p. 430.
19. Psellos, *Chronographie* II, p. 8.
20. Michael Attaleiates, *The History*, p. 32.
21. See in particular Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 100–164.
22. *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum*, p. 394.
23. *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum*, p. 481. The archaic term “Celt (Kelt)” was used by Roman authors for West Europeans in general but usually for Franks or Germans.
24. *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum*, p. 367.
25. *Ioannis Scylitzae synopsis historiarum*, p. 474.
26. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 161–164.
27. Anne Comnène, *Alexiade* I, p. 92.
28. Psellos, *Chronographie* I, pp. 9, 102.
29. Anne Comnène, *Alexiade* I, p. 92.
30. Michael Attaleiates, *The History*, pp. 536–540.

31. See Sigfús Blöndal, “Nabites the Varangian”.
32. *The Ecclesiastical History of Ordericus Vitalis* IV, p. 16.
33. See Godfrey, “The Defeated Anglo-Saxons”; Shepard, “The English and Byzantium”; Theotokis, “Rus, Varangian and Frankish mercenaries”.
34. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 138–142.



Intermission: History Becomes Legend

Before the twelfth century hardly anything can be found about the Rus and the Varangians in Scandinavian sources. The major exceptions are runestones from the eleventh century, which are primarily located in Sweden, and some skaldic poems, which are mainly preserved in Iceland. Neither type of source offers more than a few names nor possible events which can tentatively be connected to what we know about the Varangians from other sources. Nevertheless, as they offer the earliest Scandinavian evidence on the Eastern Vikings, the content and nature of these sources merits a brief discussion.

Of these two types of sources, the runestones are the only ones that stem unambiguously from the eleventh century. It is noteworthy that earlier Swedish runestones contain almost no information concerning the eastern journeys of Scandinavians, with a notable exception being the stone at Kälvesten already mentioned (in Chap. 2). In contrast to a scarcity of runic inscriptions mentioning the eastern journeys from the ninth and tenth centuries, there is an abundance of such references in inscriptions from the eleventh century. The increase in such references coincides with the presumed heyday of the Varangian Guard in Constantinople.

Some general facts can be gathered from the eleventh-century runic inscriptions concerning the eastern journeys. Greece (ON. *Grikland*) is the foreign country most frequently mentioned in inscriptions.¹ This in itself does not indicate that journeys thither were more frequent than to some other countries, but it does imply that such journeys were

considered particularly worthy of commemoration. A factor more important than mere frequency of trips might be that many of those who travelled there did not return. The inscriptions are devoted to the memory of notable men who had died “among the Greeks” (ON. *í Grikkium*).² This country was often a final destination, perhaps not only due to the hazards of travelling there, but also because Scandinavians could make a lasting career there.

The use of the Old Norse terms *Grikkland* and *Grikkir* to denote the Roman Empire and Greeks is also noteworthy. These terms were used primarily by authors writing in Latin or Old Slavonic, rather than Greek, and they were not used by the citizens of the Roman Empire for self-identification, for they regarded themselves as Romans, not Greeks or Hellenes. Thus, the runic inscriptions give an indication that the Swedish discourse on the Roman Empire was influenced by Latin or Old Slavonic intermediaries, rather than being part of a completely independent oral tradition.

In the north-eastern part of Medieval Sweden there is a rock at Ed with an inscription which states: “this inscription was ordered by Ragnvaldr who was the leader of a band of men in Greece”. Although, the Varangian Guard is not mentioned, men such as Ragnvaldr can be plausibly connected with such groups as those who went into the service of the Roman emperor. Ragnvaldr is an example of a warrior who returned to his home region, proud of his achievements in the Roman Empire.³ There are also examples of people who made a fortune for their heirs (ON. *sjár aflaði arfa sínum*) or divided gold (ON. *gulli skifti*) among their heirs or followers.⁴ There are also inscriptions made to commemorate people who had died among the Greeks.⁵

All in all, runic inscriptions indicate lively travel among Swedish warriors to the Roman Empire where they entered into some kind of service and could be expected to gain some wealth (Fig. 1). Even if Varangians or

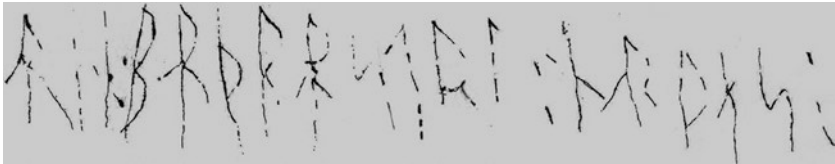


Fig. 1 The Arinbárðr runic inscription—Hagia Sophia

the Varangian Guard are not mentioned, the increased presence of Scandinavians in the Roman army offers a plausible context for these runic inscriptions, a context which fits the eleventh century, rather than earlier periods.

There are also references to the band which followed the warlord Ingvar to the East, but the geographic location in which these warriors were active seems to have been “the land of the Saracens” (ON. *Serkland*), rather than Greece. There are also references to lands “in the towns” (ON. í *Garðum*), which seems to pertain to the country of the Rus, which is known as *Garðaríki* in later Old Norse sources.⁶

The runic inscriptions are the earliest Scandinavian sources dealing with the journeys of the Vikings to the East. There is more doubt concerning the skaldic poetry which is found in thirteenth-century sagas but seems to be of an earlier provenance. First, there is always the possibility that a poem which the authors had attributed to an earlier author might be of a later date. Second, even if the poems originally belonged to the period attributed to them by saga authors, they formed a part of a living oral tradition; they were not fossils surviving intact in amber, preserved for discovery by a later generation. A rigid metric form is in itself no guarantee that a word or a line in a skaldic poem cannot be replaced by another word or a line equally fitted to the metric form.

Nevertheless, it is a fact that several poems attributed to court poets of King Haraldr of Norway were preserved and later written down in thirteenth-century sagas.⁷ One such poem by *Bólverkr Arnórsson* is found in two kings’ sagas from the thirteenth century, *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. In the second stanza, it is claimed that:

Mætr hilmir sá malma
Miklagarðs fyr barði;
mǫrg skriðu beit at borgar
barmfǫgr hóum armi.

(The glorious monarch saw metal-roofed Constantinople before the bow; many rim-fair ships advanced toward the tall rampart of the city).⁸

The riches Haraldr gained in the service of the Roman emperor became a stock feature of the poetry ascribed to his court poets. The relationship between Haraldr and the rich countries of the East is usually described in general terms, with heavy emphasis placed on the wealth acquired by Haraldr. Thus, the poetry supplements the depiction of Haraldr in the

main textual sources, the *Oration of Admonition* and the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium*.

There is little precise factual detail to be found in the court poetry, with one important exception. This is found in the poem “Sexstefja” by Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, one of Haraldr’s main poets, who mentions eighteen battles fought by Haraldr. A reference is also made to the blinding of the Roman emperor in a stanza found in the kings’ sagas *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, which goes as follows:

Stólþengils lét stinga
 —styrjöld vas þá byrjuð—
 eyðir augu bæði
 út heiðingja sítar.
 Lagði allvaldr Egða
 austr á bragning hraustan
 gráligt mark, en Girkja
 gøtu illa fór stillir.

(The destroyer of the care of the wolf [warrior] had both eyes of the emperor stabbed out; war was under way then. The overlord of the Egðir [Norwegian king] placed a hostile mark on the daring prince in the East, and the ruler of the Greeks travelled a dire road).⁹

The stanza must, however, be older than the texts in which it is found, as it seems to be referenced in the late twelfth-century source *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*.¹⁰ There is also a reference to the blinding of the emperor in a half-stanza by Þórarinn Skeggjason from an otherwise unknown poem devoted to Haraldr.¹¹ In addition, the authors of *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* seem to be unaware of the eleventh-century context of these poems and use them as evidence that Haraldr had blinded the Roman Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos. However, the only Roman emperor who was known to have suffered this punishment was Michael Calaphates in 1042 and, if they are genuinely from the eleventh century, the poems seem to attribute that particular deed to Haraldr. No early textual source connects Haraldr with this event, but the poems can be regarded as evidence that there existed an oral tradition in Norway, even as early as in the eleventh century, which connected King Haraldr to the blinding of a Roman emperor.¹²

Thus, the scant Scandinavian contemporary sources at our disposal provide evidence that, in the eleventh century, Norse warriors travelled to

Constantinople where some of them led military bands and acquired some wealth “among the Greeks”, but not everyone returned. Court poets associated with King Haraldr confirm what is known from Greek and Latin sources, that he travelled to Constantinople and gained a fortune in the service of the emperor. The main unique piece of information, not known in any other sources than the Scandinavian ones, is that Haraldr took part in the blinding of the Roman Emperor. Even if this was just a boast, it is evident that the event was known in Scandinavia, even if the poems were later used as evidence for the false claim that Haraldr had blinded Emperor Constantine IX on the occasion of his escape from Constantinople.

The runestones and skaldic poems are the only types of Scandinavian text which can be traced to the presumed heyday of the Varangian Guard. In the twelfth century, the Latin alphabet and a flowering literary culture came to Scandinavia, but the relationship of Scandinavians to the holy city of Constantinople was now formed by a new context, that of the crusades.

NOTES

1. Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige*, p. 44.
2. See Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige*, pp. 44–49.
3. Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige*, pp. 45–47.
4. Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige*, pp. 48–49.
5. Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige*, pp. 49–53.
6. Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige*, pp. 62–70.
7. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 309–319.
8. *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* II, p. 288. In order to retain some feeling for the rhythm of the poem, I have kept the original along with the (very literal) translation for this and all other Norse poetry quoted in this work.
9. *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* II, p. 118, p. 370.
10. *Monumenta historica Norvegiae*, p. 57.
11. *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* II, p. 294.
12. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 321–330.



Expeditions

WEIGHTY WEALTH FROM THE EAST

In the early twelfth century, the Icelandic lawspeaker Markús Skeggjason wrote a poem in honour of the Danish King Eiríkr. The poem was composed sometime between the death of Eiríkr in 1103 and Markús' own death in 1107. The poem is preserved in two thirteenth-century sources, *The Prose Edda* (Ic. *Snorra Edda*), a handbook of Skaldic poetry traditionally attributed to Snorri Sturluson, and *Knýtlinga saga*, a history of the Danish kings from c. 940–1185, composed in the middle of thirteenth century, probably by Ólafr Þórðarson. Snorri and Ólafr were both noted scholars and also descendants of Markús Skeggjason.

In his time, Markús Skeggjason was at the crossroads between old and new, the traditional oral culture of Iceland and a new kind of textual learning. As lawspeaker he was supposed to memorize the law and annually recite a third of it at the general assembly (ON. *alþingi*) in Iceland. In addition, as a skaldic poet he was deeply embedded in the traditional oral culture of a country which had no literary tradition before the eleventh century, not even the runic inscriptions so frequently found in other Nordic countries. However, a new kind of learning was gaining ground in Iceland, Latin and clerical, introduced by men who had studied on the European mainland. Among such men were Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson and the priest Sæmundr Sigfússon. As it turned out, both men were political allies of Markús Skeggjason and together they were responsible for the

introduction of the tithe in Iceland in 1096, placing the Icelandic church on a secure economic foundation. As the namesake of a Christian evangelist, Markús was a reliable ally of this new institution. He also seems to have been a noted historian in his time and is quoted as being the main source for the dates of Icelandic lawspeakers, from 930 into his own period, in *Íslendingabók*, the earliest written history of Iceland and composed by Ari Þorgilsson between 1122 and 1133.

The context of Markús' poem is either the consecration of the archbishop of Lund in 1104 or the consecration of a new bishop for the recently founded see at Hólar in 1106, at which time the poem might have been presented orally to the successor of Eiríkr, King Nikulás. In either case, the Icelandic lawspeaker would have had to travel to the Danish kingdom to recite the poem in person. It is not unlikely that the poem was composed shortly before its presentation, as Markús would probably have based it on Danish oral sources.

Eiríksdrápa by Markús Skeggjason is the earliest extant source for King Eiríkr of Denmark's armed pilgrimage to the East. The pilgrimage's ultimate destination was supposed to be the Holy Land in Palestine, but King Eiríkr never reached this destination. He died in Cyprus in 1103. Before that, however, he had managed to visit Constantinople and Emperor Alexios I. He would also have managed to associate with the Varangians serving in the Roman army.

Eiríksdrápa's focus is on King Eiríkr's achievements on the international scene. It states that he gained wealth and glory in the East and places particular emphasis on his military success against the Vends, as the inhabitants of Pomerania and other regions of the Eastern Baltic were called. It then relates how Eiríkr brought holy relics from the city of Rome and how he managed to wrest an archbishopric from the Saxons, that which was established at Lund a year after his death in Cyprus. His journey to the Holy Land is also accounted. It mentions that Eiríkr received gifts and wealth from the king of France and from the wealthy emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. One stanza especially notes these royal gifts:

Blíðan gœddi björtum auði
 Bjarnar hlýra Frakklands stýrir;
 stórar lét sér randgarðs rýrir
 ríks keisara gjafir líka.
 Hónum lét til hervígs búna
 harra spjalli láðmenn snjalla
 alla leið, áðr qðlingr næði
 Jóta grundar Césars fundi.

(The ruler of France [= Philip I] endowed the pleasant brother of Björn [= Eiríkr] with bright wealth; the diminisher of the shield-wall [warrior] found himself pleased with the great gifts of the powerful emperor [= Henry IV]. The companion of lords [ruler = Henry IV] gave him brave guides, ready for battle, all the way, before the noble leader of the land of the Jótar [= Denmark > = Eiríkr] was able to meet Caesar).¹

The respect that he is granted by other monarchs seems to be no less important for Eiríkr's fame than success in war against the pagan Vends. These kings are described in exalted terms, especially the king of Germany, also known as the Holy Roman Emperor. Eiríkr seems to be subordinate in his relationship with these monarchs, as he is the recipient of their generosity. There is also an implicit hierarchy among the gift-givers, as more emphasis is laid on the Holy Roman Emperor than the king of France.

However, Eiríkr's fame reaches its climax when he meets the Roman emperor in Constantinople. This meeting is described in a whole stanza, and even more emphasis is laid on the honour granted to Eiríkr:

Hildingr þá við hæst lof aldar
 hofgan auð í gulli rauðu
 halfa lest af harra sjölfum
 harða vitr í Miklagarði.
 Áðan tók við allvalds klæðum
 Eirekr; þó vas gefit fleira;
 reynir veitti herskip hönnum
 hersa máttar sex ok átta.

(The very wise ruler received along with the highest praise of men weighty wealth in red gold, half a ton, from the lord himself in Mikligarðr [Constantinople]. Previously Eiríkr accepted the clothes of the mighty ruler; yet even more was given; the trier of the might of hersar [ruler = the Roman emperor] granted him six and eight warships).²

If we compare this stanza to the one depicting his meeting with the monarchs of France and the Holy Roman Empire, there is an escalation in the terms used. First, the gifts are more exalted and are describing in more detailed description. Second, the terms themselves are superlative. The Roman emperor, Alexios I, is not only a lord, like the Holy Roman Emperor, but “the lord himself” and Eiríkr receives the “highest praise” for meeting him.

As the recipient of the emperor's gifts, could Eiríkr be regarded as his vassal and subordinate? This is unlikely, as then he would have had a similar relationship with the monarchs of France and Germany. Nevertheless, the relationship between these different monarchs is clearly hierarchical and the Roman emperor seems to be at the top of that hierarchy. Thus, the particular admiration granted to the Emperor reflects the "soft power" wielded by the Roman Empire in its relations with distant countries, such as the Nordic monarchies.

There does not seem to be a great difference between the ideology expressed in *Eiríksdrápa* and in traditional Roman ideas about the occurrence of Christian kingdoms and the role of the Roman emperor within that community. The poet seems to assign the emperor a special role and also the honour he granted to Eiríkr. In the poem, Eiríkr is positioned as a respected member in the community of kings. Although the poem's perspective is that of the Northmen, the meaning of this abundance of gifts to the patron himself is also worthy of consideration. Should such endowments be regarded as merely a luxurious display of wealth, or did they have a more substantial meaning as an indicator of how the emperor regarded the nature of his relationship with Eiríkr? In the Roman Empire there was no institution such as vassalage, nevertheless, in the twelfth century we have evidence that the emperors regarded the recipients of large sums of money as their liegemen (Gr. λίζιοι) who were meant to repay such offerings with their service. Such a payment of money was, however, regarded as a gift (Gr. δόσις) by the emperor and there was no question of such an arrangement being inherited without provisos, as happened in the medieval feudal kingdoms of Western Europe.

In the Treaty of Devol, negotiated between Emperor Alexios I and Bohemond of Antioch in 1108, the latter was granted an annual sum of two hundred gold pieces for services rendered and his status as a liegeman was confirmed by a chrysobull. It is not unlikely that the emperor would have wanted to place his relationship with the Danish king on similar grounds.³ Eiríkr's early death, in Cyprus on his way to the Holy Land, precludes any study of the potential nature of his service to the emperor. However, it should be noted that such payments did not always have to be paid on an annual basis. The payment to Eiríkr might have been intended to temporarily finance his efforts in the expedition which was to follow, on behalf of the emperor, but it was forestalled by Eiríkr's death. Most of the

warriors who took part in the third wave of the First Crusade in 1101 had undertaken similar obligations to Emperor Alexios I.

In twelfth-century Danish chronicles, such as *Chronicon Roskildense* and *Brevis historia regum Daciae*, King Eiríkr was generally characterized as “the Good” (Lat. *bonus*), but very little was mentioned about his reign except that he went on an armed pilgrimage to Palestine and died in Cyprus.⁴ It is only in works from the early thirteenth century, such as *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus and *Knýtlinga saga*, that anything more was related about his exploits in Constantinople.

At the time of the composition of these narratives, the disastrous results of the Fourth Crusade had created a lasting distrust between the Latins and Greeks, replacing an earlier period that saw some tension, but also cooperation and a long-standing alliance. This changed situation between the Roman Empire and the main Latin powers may be reflected in some of the Old Norse literature written after 1204, although one should avoid placing too much importance on the influence of any single event on a change in attitudes. The significance of the capture of Constantinople and the establishment of the Latin Empire there rather lies in the fact that the Scandinavians now had lost the traditional focal point of allegiance to the Roman emperor, which may have weakened a traditionally solid relationship.

The elaborate description of King Eiríkr’s armed pilgrimage in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, written around 1210, may reflect a possible crisis in a long-established relationship. According to Saxo, Emperor Alexios I had received King Eiríkr outside the city walls of Constantinople and had kept the gates closed, as he mistrusted the king’s intentions. Eiríkr asked the emperor for permission to speak to his countrymen, which the emperor permitted, but he sent bilingual spies to listen in on the king. According to Saxo,

At the same time he also suspected the Danes that he had a close relationship with, as he thought that they would have greater respect for a king from the homeland than for the money he had paid them. Among the soldiers serving in Constantinople, it is those who speak the Danish tongue that have the highest rank in the army and normally serve as the personal body-guard of the emperor.⁵

Eiríkr then held a rousing speech where he exhorted the Danish soldiers to remain loyal servants of the emperor and demanded that they show the

same fidelity to the emperor as they did to himself. Hearing this, the emperor relaxed and gave Eiríkr a solemn reception in the city, bestowed him with gifts and provided him with ships and provisions for his journey.⁶ This distrust and tension between the emperor and king is not mentioned in earlier sources, although Saxo also does emphasize the Danish king's loyalty to the emperor.⁷ Such a narrative could tentatively be read in the context of increased tension between the emperor and Western monarchs from 1180 onwards, especially after the conquest of Constantinople in 1204. However, if such a tension is reflected in this episode, it is nevertheless ostensibly deconstructed by Saxo, with the Danish contingent and the Danish king remaining true to the Roman emperor.

In contrast, the same armed pilgrimage is described in the Old Norse *Knýtlinga saga*, composed in the 1250s, but that narrative does not mention any tension between the emperor and the king. However, there is a short tale comparing King Eiríkr and King Sigurðr of Norway, relating that “Álexis Girkjakonungr” [King Alexios of the Greeks] offered them both a choice between half a ton of gold or to have horse races held in their honour. Whereas Sigurðr chose the horse races, Eiríkr chose the gold “and the opinion of people is divided, which of them chose more majestically”.⁸ As *Knýtlinga saga* is based on some of the same sources as *Gesta Danorum*, including *Eiríksdrápa*, one might surmise that these sources did not include any narratives about distrust between the emperor and the king, or of Eiríkr's speech to the Danes in the emperor's service.

Thus, there was a marked evolution in the narratives concerning the journey of the Danish king to the East. The earliest source, *Eiríksdrápa*, paints the image of a hierarchical order of Christian monarchs in which the Roman emperor is placed at the top, and a Danish king who is eager to receive the dignity which his fellow monarchs are able to grant him. In contrast, very little is said concerning Eiríkr's journey to the East in the earliest narrative sources. The later sources are infused with legends, but they are also emblematic of a subtle shift in the relationship between the Roman emperor and the Danish king, with the latter asserting himself more forcefully, even if the alliance remained intact.

A SHIP WITH GOLDEN DRAGONS

While *Eiríksdrápa* may be a rather laconic source and often hard to interpret, there is even less contemporary evidence for a similar mission of King Sigurðr of Norway in 1107–1110. The earliest Latin source, composed

around 1125, seems to be the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* by William of Malmesbury, in which we find the following description:

Siward [ON. Sigurðr] king of Norway, in his early years comparable to the bravest heroes, having entered on a voyage to Jerusalem, and asking the king's permission, wintered in England. After expending vast sums upon the churches, as soon as the western breeze opened the gates of spring to soothe the ocean, he regained his vessels, and proceeding to sea, terrified the Balearic Isles, which are called Majorca and Minorca, by his arms ... Arriving at Jerusalem he, for the advancement of the Christian cause, laid siege to, battered, and subdued the maritime cities of Tyre and Sidon. Changing his route, and entering Constantinople, he fixed a ship, beaked with golden dragons, as a trophy, on the church of Sancta Sophia [i.e. Hagia Sophia].

His men dying in numbers in this city, he discovered a remedy for the disorder, by making the survivors drink wine more sparingly, and diluted with water [...]. Wherefore the emperor contemplating his sagacity and courage, which promised something great, was inclined to detain him. But he adroitly deluded the expectation in which he was already devouring the Norwegian gold; for, obtaining permission to go to a neighbouring city, he deposited with him the chests of his treasures, filled with lead and sealed up, as pledges of a very speedy return; by which contrivance the emperor was deceived, and the other returned home by land.⁹

This tale indicates that Sigurðr was highly esteemed by the Roman emperor, but yet he did not want to enter his service. It also has echoes of King Haraldr's abrupt departure from Constantinople some sixty-odd years earlier. However, as the source is Anglo-Norman, it may be influenced by the tensions created between the Roman Empire and the Latin West by the First Crusade, as yet hardly noticeable in Scandinavian sources.

The earliest Norwegian source of Sigurðr's travels, *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*, was composed around 1180. It mentions Sigurðr's armed pilgrimage, but nothing is said about a stop in Constantinople or about the king's relationship with the Roman emperor.¹⁰ *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum*, which was composed sometime around 1190, is the earliest reference to a trip made by Sigurðr to Constantinople in a Scandinavian source. There is, however, only a brief mention of his stay there:

He went to Mikligarðr and received much honour there from the emperor's reception and great gifts. He left his ships there as a memorial of his visit. He took off one of his ships several great and costly figure-heads and put them on the church of St. Peter.¹¹

It is notable that the ships left behind by Sigurðr, as described by William of Malmesbury, are also mentioned in this text, even it names a different church as the recipient of his gift. In the context of this narrative, the honour that the emperor granted to Sigurðr is not very distinctive, as it is stated that he had formerly gone “to Jerusalem, where he was received with great honour and given splendid treasures”. It is also claimed that he won victories “over several heathen towns”, but there is no indication here that he fought as a liegeman of the emperor.¹² He could have been fighting on behalf of the king of Jerusalem, a hypothesis supported by references found in Arabic sources.¹³ The most logical reading of the text would suggest that Sigurðr, having journeyed to Palestine with his fleet, only visited Constantinople on his way back from the Holy Land, which fits well with the earlier itinerary provided by William of Malmesbury.

Nevertheless, King Sigurðr may have performed some services for the emperor in return for the “splendid treasures” he received in Constantinople. This can be inferred from the fact that he left his ships behind and travelled back to Norway by land, through Hungary, Saxony, and Denmark.¹⁴ The Roman emperor probably had some use for the Norwegian fleet, especially if one assumes that some of Sigurðr’s men also remained behind to man the fleet.

As with accounts of King Eiríkr, the narrative tradition concerning King Sigurðr’s journey to the East changed in the thirteenth century. In the Old Norse *Morkinskinna*, composed around 1220, there is an elaborate account of Sigurðr, known as Jórsalafari [the pilgrim to Jerusalem], and his stay in Constantinople, richly detailed and probably based in part upon the testimony of people who had actually been in the city.¹⁵ In this episode there is also an account which seems to highlight some tension between the king and the emperor. When exposed to the splendour of the imperial city, King Sigurðr told his fellow warriors to act as if they were not impressed:

We are told that King Sigurðr had his horse and those of his men shod with gold before riding into the city. Then he told his men to ride proudly into the city and pay no attention to all the novelties they saw and take no notice even if the shoes fell off the horses. They acted accordingly.¹⁶

Further tales are told of Sigurðr's efforts to be accepted as the emperor's equal. Nevertheless, the relation between King Sigurðr and Emperor Alexios is described as very amicable in *Morkinskinna* and there is a vivid account of the horseraces that the emperor held in Sigurðr's honour.¹⁷

This pride of a Norwegian king is a novelty in *Morkinskinna's* account, but there is no indication that Sigurðr or any other Scandinavian would have regarded himself as anything but an ally of the emperor. In both Saxo's tale of Eiríkr and *Morkinskinna's* tale of Sigurðr, the ultimate message is that the Scandinavian kings wished to demonstrate their strength to the emperor, while remaining friends and allies.

A PLACE MOST FIT FOR SUCH MEN AS YOU

The armed pilgrimage of Earl Rognvaldr of Orkney, which took place from 1151 to 1153, is the third important visit by a Scandinavian ruler in the twelfth century. It is described in *Orkneyinga saga*, composed shortly after 1200. The section concerning Earl Rognvaldr is rich in detail and seems to have relied on sources close to the king. It is unusual among the Scandinavian crusading narratives in that the initiative for the journey seems to have come directly from Constantinople itself, as it is described in the saga:

That summer came from abroad, from Mikligarðr, Eindriði the Young; he had been a mercenary there for a long time. He was able to tell them much news from there, and men thought it entertaining to ask him about things that were happening in the world abroad. The earl often talked with him. And one time when they were talking, Eindriði said: "I think it is strange, earl, that you will not fare out to the Holy Land, and instead have to rely on stories about the things happening there. It is a place most fit for such men as you, for the sake of your prowess; you will be very much honoured there when you associate with men of rank." And when Eindriði had said that, many others backed him up with this, and goaded the earl on that he should become the leader of this voyage.¹⁸

It is interesting to note that the journey's motivation seems to be entirely secular, as the Earl is driven to the quest by the honour to be gained from association with important people. However, the only notable person directly mentioned in the narrative is the Roman emperor of Constantinople.¹⁹ The main purpose for this armed pilgrimage, therefore,



Fig. 1 The Madrid Skylitzes (Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid, MS Graecus Vitr. 26-2)—Axe-wielding Varangians

seems to be an audience with the emperor and the honour to be gained from that meeting (Fig. 1).

The earl finally decided to make this voyage, along with Earl Erlingr Kyrpinga-Ormsson of Norway and other noblemen.²⁰ Erlingr was married to Kristín, the daughter of King Sigurðr, and later would make his son Magnús the king of Norway, with Erlingr as de facto ruler. At this time, however, he still had to prove his mettle and an armed pilgrimage offered a good opportunity for this.

The journey did not proceed as smoothly as planned and Eindriði proved to be less than reliable once the preparations had begun. He was in constant opposition to Rognvaldr and Erlingr, and, in the end, he left the expedition after they had sailed through the straits of Gibraltar and went to Marseille with six ships.²¹

They took a similar route to Sigurðr's, sailing through the Mediterranean to the Holy Land, fighting Saracens along the way; this journey is described in lively detail in *Orkneyinga saga*.²² Their ultimate destination seems to be Constantinople, and there the earl finally meets Emperor Manuel (r. 1143–1180), a well-known figure in Old Norse sources:

When Earl Rognvaldr and his men came to Mikligarðr, they had a hearty welcome from the emperor and the Varangians. Menelaus was then emperor

over Mikligarðr, whom we call Manuel; he gave the earl much money, and offered them tribute if they would remain there. They stayed there awhile that winter in very good cheer. Eindriði the young was there, and he had very great honour from the emperor. He had little to do with Earl Rognvaldr and his men, and rather tried to set other men against them.²³

Rognvaldr then decided to return home, mostly taking the land-route, as Sigurðr also had done. It is noteworthy that the Roman emperor is the only Christian dignitary mentioned in this description of the armed pilgrimage; the king of Jerusalem and other lords in Palestine seem to be of no consequence. There is a direct mention of tribute and the prospect of serving the emperor as mercenaries, even if it is not made clear whether or not the earl and his followers accepted this proposition. Rognvaldr and his companions did not stay long, and this partly seems to be due to antagonism from the already established Varangian, Eindriði.²⁴ The departure of Rognvaldr and his fellow-crusaders thus appears to be dependent on their current situation, rather than on any ideological reluctance to join the army of the Roman emperor.

While it is evident that there was some kind of dependent relationship between Rognvaldr and Emperor Manuel I, its exact nature is not specified. As the Earl of Orkney, Rognvaldr had an established relationship with the king of Norway and his alliance with Earl Erlingr would only have strengthened that relationship. However, the Roman institution of *ligesse* did not require foreign dignitaries to forfeit their obligations to other rulers; they only had to swear an oath that their primary obligation was to the Roman emperor.

The career of the Varangian Eindriði offers an interesting example of a servant of the Roman emperor who enjoyed a high status in the north, which might have been enhanced by his proximity to this most noble of Christian kings. However, he did not manage to stay on friendly terms with the Nordic kings that he was trying to recruit for service to the Roman Empire. It seems that a Varangian who had returned to his home country could often be a source of trouble, perhaps because the honour that was to be gained in the service of the Roman Empire was not dependent on the favour of his Nordic overlord. Thus, Eindriði ended up an adversary of the very king that he had been trying to draft into the service of the Roman Empire.

THEY WENT BACK WITH HONOUR

The early thirteenth-century narrative *De profectioe Danorum in Hierosolimam* depicts the journey of Danish and Norwegian crusaders to the Holy Land in 1191–1192, where they arrived late for the Third Crusade. The leader of the expedition, Ásbjörn (Esbern), the brother of Archbishop Absalon, was quoted in a speech at the outset of the expedition stating that the Greeks would surely praise the strength of the Danes as defenders of the empire.²⁵ This source claims that when the Nordic crusaders arrived there had been enmity between the English and Greeks, but the author avoids any indication of whom he thought was more responsible for this conflict. However, it is stated that some of the crusaders had visited Constantinople on their return journey “and were received honourably by the King of Greece”.²⁶ The narrative also describes with admiration some monuments of saints in Constantinople. The end of the mission is described as such: “Thus when all the business had been concluded for which the travellers had come, they went back with honour, taking leave of their kinsmen who were courtiers of the king and are called the Varangians, armed with the seal of the king”.²⁷ This, again, demonstrates that there was generally a good relationship between the Roman emperor and warriors from Denmark and Norway, but the brevity of the description does not allow us to speculate as to whether any of the crusaders had actually entered the service of the emperor.²⁸

Descriptions of armed pilgrimages by Scandinavians in the twelfth century are focused, to a greater or lesser degree, on the honour granted to the Nordic dignitaries in Constantinople. Reference is also made to the gifts from the emperor, but only in the Earl of Orkney’s instance is explicit reference made to the possibility of the Emperor hiring these travellers as mercenaries. Nevertheless, the descriptions of the armed pilgrimages very much revolve around the wealth of Constantinople and the trust the Scandinavians enjoyed with the emperor. It does not seem a great leap then to assume that a key part of the bargain was service in exchange for payment of some kind.

Another important feature in all of these descriptions is the continued presence of Scandinavian soldiers in the service of the emperor, presumably known as Varangians, although that term is nowhere to be found in the aforementioned descriptions. It can be assumed that the presence of the Varangians contributed a great deal to the good relationship between the Roman emperor and all of the twelfth-century Scandinavian armed

pilgrims whose travelogues have been preserved. The emperor may not have made much of a distinction between the newly arrived crusaders and the long-established Scandinavians who served in the imperial army.

NOTES

1. *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* II, p. 453.
2. *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* II, p. 457.
3. See Sverrir Jakobsson, "Emperors and Vassals", p. 661.
4. *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae medii aevi* I, pp. 25, 128–131
5. Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum. Danmarkshistorien* II, p. 78.
6. Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum. Danmarkshistorien* II, pp. 78–82.
7. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 423–428.
8. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXV, pp. 236–237.
9. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum* I, pp. 740, 742.
10. *Monumenta historica Norvegiae*, pp. 65–66.
11. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIX, pp. 48–49.
12. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIX, pp. 47–48.
13. See Cobb, *The Race for Paradise*, p. 111.
14. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIX, p. 49.
15. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 641–650.
16. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIV, p. 96.
17. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIV, pp. 96–100.
18. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXIV, p. 194.
19. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXIV, p. 236.
20. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXIV, p. 208.
21. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXIV, pp. 208–222.
22. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXIV, pp. 222–235.
23. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXIV, p. 236.
24. For further discussion, see Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 608–640.
25. *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae medii aevi* II, pp. 465–467.
26. *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae medii aevi* II, p. 490.
27. *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae medii aevi* II, p. 491.
28. For a further discussion, see Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 428–444.



Interconnections

THE EMISSARY

In the year 1196, an unfamiliar figure appeared at the court of King Sverrir of Norway with a rather extraordinary request from Emperor Alexios Angelos of Constantinople. This message is described in a contemporary source, *Sverris saga*, probably composed by the Icelandic abbot Karl Jónsson (d. 1213):

Hreiðarr was the name of a man from Viken, who had long been absent from the land [i.e. Norway], and had travelled widely. He came this summer to Norway, bringing a letter and a seal, called a chrysobull; this seal was sent by Lord Alexios, king of the Greeks, to King Sverrir, and in the letter it was written that King Sverrir should send him thousand good warriors. [The king of the Greeks] had also sent a man named Pétr, who was called Pétr the Enraged, with a similar message into Denmark to King Knútr, and he had sent a third man to the king of the Swedes. Hreiðarr the Messenger often spoke to the king of his message, and the king at first took kindly to it, saying that he would think on it; and Hreiðarr stayed with the king the following winter.¹

The source for this mission is as reliable as any medieval narrative source possibly could be. *Sverris saga* was composed during the king's life, or very soon after his death, and there are indications that the Norwegian king himself had some influence on its composition. The information also

appears reliable, for it correctly names the emperor in question and his official documents were in fact known as chrysobulls.

However, what can be ascertained is that the emperor did not succeed in his request for Scandinavian soldiers to fight on his behalf. The reaction of the Danish and Swedish kings is not known in any detail, but *Sverris saga* explains the position of the Norwegian king Sverrir:

The following spring Hreiðarr asked of the king whether his errand to his country would succeed. The king answered thus: "I see little prospect of peace here in the land. I hear that the Danes are again to feed wolves to prey on us if they can effect it; and within the land some abide in whom I should put little trust if a hostile band raised its head. I am not willing in these circumstances to send my troops away." Then Hreiðarr asked if the king would give leave to yeomen's or merchant's sons to go if they were willing; and the king said that that might be done.²

Although the request was ultimately unsuccessful, it is noteworthy that this was mainly due to the civil unrest in Norway and to the king's quarrels with the Danes; there is no record of any doubts expressed by King Sverrir concerning the legitimacy of the request. The lack of a positive outcome does not detract from the significant fact that the request was made and that the Norwegian king actively considered it.

The most obvious indication in the *Sverris saga*-narrative of the importance of Hreiðar's mission is the mention of the emperor's seal, the chrysobull (Gr. χρυσόβουλλον). The word chrysobull can be used to signify both a seal as well as a document issued under the emperor's seal. A letter sealed with a chrysobull was generally considered to be a document of great importance. They were used in diplomatic exchanges, but also in domestic documents such as grants of estates and privileges. The use of chrysobulls in imperial correspondence seems to have originated in the ninth century. The earliest bulls are similar in type and general appearance to coins and were probably manufactured in mints.

In the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies*, a seal worth two gold pieces (Gr. δισολδία) is listed as appropriate for most monarchs, although the kings of Armenia and the Eastern Patriarch merited seals worth three solidi and the caliph in Baghdad and the sultan of Egypt merited seals worth four solidi.³ Even more valuable seals were listed in written sources for use on special occasions, although no such seals have been preserved. The purpose of the seal was both to serve as authentication of a document and

as a symbol of the wealth and glory of the emperor. Documents sealed with golden bulls were thus of highest importance.

The use of the chrysobull was, therefore, an indication that these messages to the three Scandinavian kings were of the utmost importance. But what of the messengers themselves? Here we are limited in our analysis to the messenger who came to Norway, Hreiðarr, who is always referred to in *Sverris saga* in respect to this mission and called “Hreiðarr sendimaðr” (“Hreiðarr the Messenger”). In this, he actually became the namesake of Emperor Alexios who had the surname Angelos (Gr. ἄγγελος, “messenger”). Nothing is written about Hreiðarr’s life before this mission, but it is notable that afterwards he joined a party of the king’s opponents, called “Baglar” because of their ecclesiastical connections (Lat. *baculum*, “bishop’s staff”). Hreiðarr finally surrendered to the king following a siege of the stronghold of the Baglar in Tunsberg. By then he had been greatly weakened but the king tended to him personally. Soon after, King Sverrir himself became terminally ill, yet he kept Hreiðarr close by his side: “The king ordered that he should have the same nursing and care as himself and conversed with him often. Hreidar was a wise man and was knowledgable about many things”.⁴ Nowhere in the narrative is there any explanation as to why the king would show such favour to a man who had previously been one of his foremost enemies. The saga is also curiously silent about which things that Hreiðarr could share his knowledge of with the king. The only clue offered in the narrative is his connection to the Roman emperor.

Prior to his mission to Norway, Hreiðarr is not mentioned in *Sverris saga*. As he seems to have been a man of some distinction, his absence from the narrative requires some explanation. The most obvious one would be that Hreiðarr had been away from Norway for a long time at the court of the emperor. His experiences at court of the most illustrious monarch in Christendom would have been the most likely topic for the king to discuss with Hreiðarr, as he definitely would have been knowledgeable about the affairs of the emperor and his court in Constantinople.

No information is provided in *Sverris saga* as to what Hreiðarr had been doing in Constantinople. If he had indeed been in the emperor’s service for a notable period of time, it would be tempting to speculate that he might have been one of the Varangians serving in the Roman army. Unfortunately, any information on this is lacking. There is, however, some reason to believe that he had been in the favour of the emperor. The most

obvious reason is that he alone was entrusted with a mission that had not been granted to other Norsemen in Constantinople.

The most important issue is the contents of the missive which required an imperial seal and a reliable emissary. Why was the emperor requesting the support of the Scandinavian kings at this particular time? No mention is made of war against the infidels, and indeed the greatest threat to the Roman Empire at the time of Alexios' inauguration seems to have been the aggressive posturing of King Henry VI of Sicily and the Holy Roman Empire. Henry had plans to go on a crusade and gain some recompense for the high-handed treatment of his father, King Frederick Barbarossa, by Isaac, Alexios' brother and predecessor. Emperor Alexios attempted to use the dependable methods of Roman diplomacy to impress the messengers of King Henry in the very year of 1196, much to the scorn of the messengers. They regarded such methods as outdated and stated that the emperor should "put on iron instead of gold," as quoted by the historian Niketas Choniates.⁵ Nevertheless, Alexios' preferred mode of dealing with the impending German threat was not through the assistance of mercenaries. Instead, he tried to buy off the Germans through a special levy imposed on the provinces and the capital, which turned out to be a very unpopular measure. Another looming threat to the empire came from the Venetians, who had sent a fleet to the Aegean Sea in 1196, probably with a view to intimidate the emperor. However, very little came out of this expedition. There was also internal unrest in the Roman Empire, and Alexios III had only recently usurped the throne through the deposition of his brother Isaac in 1195. His situation made long-term strategic alliances all the more urgent at this moment in time.

As the mission to the Scandinavian courts cannot with any certainty be placed in the context of any immediate strategical concern of the emperor, the mission should rather be seen as a part of a long-term strategy. Perhaps the emperor felt that the Varangian Guard needed replenishing or, more likely, he felt the need for mercenaries independent of any connection to his Mediterranean rivals. Such assistance had often been readily available from foreign kings. Around 1090, shortly before the First Crusade, Count Robert of Flanders had sent five hundred cavalymen to serve under the emperor's direct command.⁶ Emperor Manuel Komnenos (r. 1143–1180) had been in correspondence with West European monarchs concerning such matters, in particular with King Henry II of England.⁷ It is thus not in itself without precedence that Emperor Alexios would be hoping for support of that nature from the Scandinavian kings.

As it turned out, the mission of 1196 was an indication of the coming end, rather than a new beginning. With the capture of Constantinople by Latin troops in 1204 and the installation of a Latin emperor in Constantinople, the relationship between the Roman Empire and Scandinavia would never again be the same. This was hardly anticipated by the Scandinavian monarchs themselves, or by historians writing in the thirteenth century who placed great store in the dignified manner in which earlier crusaders had been treated by the Roman emperor.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

As the episode of Hreiðarr the Messenger demonstrates, members of both factions in Norwegian politics were interested in learning about the Roman Empire and for a time the Norwegian royal family continued to maintain the contacts there which had been established by King Sigurðr in the early twelfth century.

Kristín, the daughter of the King Sigurðr who had visited Constantinople around 1110, was later married to another nobleman with Roman contacts, the Earl Erlingr who had followed the Earl of Orkney on his armed pilgrimage (or grand tour) in the 1150s. In 1161, Kristín and Erlingr managed to have their son Magnús crowned as the king of Norway, a tendentious issue as he was not the son of a king, which Magnús' rivals claimed was a necessary precondition for kingship. No less than her wily husband, Kristín was an important supporter of her son, and she was instrumental in trying to invoke the support of her cousin, Valdemar King of Denmark. As it turned out, Valdemar was very much the stronger partner in this alliance of the Danish and Norwegian kings. This was used by King Magnús' rivals to the throne, of whom the strongest turned out to be a Faroese priest who claimed to be the son of King Sigurðr Haraldsson (d. 1155). This renegade priest was later to rule as King Sverrir. Unlike Magnús with his Danish connections, Sverrir enjoyed the support of the Swedish nobility and after he had established himself as a king, he established a marital alliance with the king of Sweden.

In addition to inter-Scandinavian rivalries, the Norwegian royals also maintained an interest in the Roman Empire. In the thirteenth-century text *Heimskringla*, it is claimed that, following her stay in Denmark from 1165 to 1166, “Kristín went away from the country with a man called Grímr [r]usli; and they went to Constantinople, where they were for a time, and had several children”.⁸ The identity of this Grímr rusli is not known and nothing is said about whether or not he was a Varangian.

This curious elopement by the Norwegian king's mother is not explained further in the text. According to the Icelandic annals, Kristín died in 1178, but it is not stated where she was living at that time.⁹ The excerpt from *Heimskringla*, however, implies that Kristín and Grímr left Constantinople at some time, so it is likely that she had either returned to Norway or to her cousin King Valdemar of Denmark's court (Fig. 1). Following her death, Erlingr and Magnús had to face the rebellion led by King Sverrir and both were eventually killed fighting this formidable opponent.

As a foreign princess, it seems likely that Kristín would have enjoyed the hospitality of Emperor Manuel Komnenos, who had hosted her husband Earl Erlingr a decade earlier. He would have regarded her visit as a continuation of his earlier relationship with Earl Erlingr, and also that of his own grandfather with King Sigurðr.

Emperor Manuel, however, also had connections with the other branch of the Norwegian royal family, which was headed by King Sverrir. Around 1180, a man claiming to be the son of a Norwegian king returned from the Roman Empire, as told in *Sverris saga*:

Fig. 1 The Dagmar Crucifix (Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen)



The same spring, Eiríkr, said to be a son of King Sigurðr Haraldsson, came to King Sverrir. He had been a long time abroad, as far as Jerusalem, and had entered the river Jordan bearing a lighted taper in his hand. According to his story, confirmed by his men, he had declared before entering the river, that God would let the taper emerge from it still alight, “if he really was the son of King Sigurðr.” Those who accompanied him to the river said that he came out holding the taper still alight. Eiríkr had been in the service of the Emperor Manuel in Mikligarðr, and had also visited men of high estate, far and wide, in the southern lands; he was courteous, well informed, short of stature, and plain in appearance. He requested King Sverrir to give him leave to undergo the ordeal, that he might bring himself into the family he believed to be his, and prove himself the son of King Sigurðr.¹⁰

King Sverrir allowed Eiríkr to undergo an ordeal carrying a red-hot iron, although there seems to have been tension between the putative brothers as Eiríkr made it very explicit that he was not prepared to prove the paternity of King Sverrir, which was also disputed. As it is narrated in *Sverris saga*:

Shortly afterwards, preparatory to the ordeal, Eiríkr fasted; and when the time came that he should bear the iron, King Sverrir dictated the form of the oath and spoke thus: “For this cause you lay your hands on the Holy Relics and the Book, and make this appeal to God: that He will allow your hand to come unharmed from the iron if you are the son of King Sigurðr and my brother.” And Eiríkr answered: “So may God let me move my hand, unharmed from this iron as I am the son of King Sigurðr; but I will not bear the iron to prove the paternity of other men than myself.” After taking this oath he bore the iron, and his truth was made fully clear. King Sverrir then acknowledged his kinship to Eiríkr, and gave him a high position at his court. Eiríkr was a popular man, most humble, and ruled his company exceedingly well.¹¹

It is clear from the text that Eiríkr had been in the service of Emperor Manuel and thus possibly had been a member of the Varangian Guard, although that is not stated outright. His tour of the Mediterranean seems to have had relevance for his pretensions to be regarded as a king’s son; the respect accorded him by foreign nobility was a part of the symbolic capital that he could use to negotiate his social position back in Norway.

It is possible that Eiríkr and Kristín Sigurðardóttir were in Constantinople at the same time, although their paths might not have crossed. If, as we assume, Hreiðarr the Messenger had been in Constantinople for a long

period of time before he became the emperor's trusted messenger, he might also have met either Kristín or Eiríkr. In any case, the presence of these three members of the Norwegian elite in Constantinople at a similar time demonstrates that contact between the Emperor and Norwegian royalty had been almost continuous for the better part of three decades.

In the end, Hreiðarr joined the Norwegian royal family, as he married the daughter of King Magnús Erlingsson, who is called Margrét in one source, but Kristín in another. He was later to return to the city in which he had spent a formative period of his life. In 1209, Hreiðarr and Pétur Steypir, a nephew of King Sverrir and one of the leaders of his faction, decided to travel to Constantinople together. Pétur had married Ingibjörg by then, another daughter of Magnús Erlingsson. The two sisters and their husbands went on this journey together, but Pétur and Ingibjörg died en route. Hreiðarr and his wife finally arrived in Constantinople only to find the situation there much changed, with a Latin emperor ruling and various exiled Roman factions contesting his rule.¹² It is not known what Hreiðarr thought of this new situation, only that he died in Constantinople in 1214.¹³ Among those historical persons mentioned in this work, he is the one most likely to actually have been a Varangian. His demise thus signifies the end of an era in Roman-Scandinavian relations.

THE SWORD FROM CONSTANTINOPLE

Around the time that Emperor Alexios III's messengers were touring Scandinavia, an Icelander returned to his home in the north of the country. He was called Sigurðr grikkir ("Sigurd the Greek") and he brought with him a sword that he had acquired in Constantinople. He is not called a Varangian in the sources, no more than any of the other Scandinavians who were known to have been in the service of the emperor in the twelfth century.

Two sources allude to Sigurðr and his exploits in Iceland, with a vague reference to his stay in the Roman Empire. The first is *Guðmundar saga dýra*, which revolves around the infamous burning of Langahlíð in 1197 in which the protagonist Guðmundr dýri killed his rival Önundr Þorkelsson. Sigurðr tried his hand as a legal advocate at one of the courts at the Icelandic parliament, *alþingi*, but was not successful.¹⁴

Sigurðr was later a part of the group which attempted to avenge the killings of Önundr and his family, and he volunteered to kill one of the leaders of the group of Guðmundr dýri, Hákon Þórðarson at Laufás. This

was considered to be an ignoble deed and Hákon taunted him for lack of gratitude, as he had taken Sigurðr under his protection when he came back to Iceland, however, he had found Sigurðr in bed three times with his own wife.¹⁵

Later, Sigurðr was a part of the group that attempted to kill the magnate Kálfr Guttormsson, but he rode off before the group and warned Kálfr, who sought refuge in a church. Sigurðr then took a stand before the church and warned the attackers that he would fight anyone who violated its sanctity.¹⁶

This depiction of Sigurðr is far from an example of the glorified, ideal type of returned Varangians which occurs in later Icelandic literature. It seems that he was not very successful in Icelandic politics, in which the ability to gain favourable verdicts in court cases was considered an essential asset. His situation when he returned to Iceland also seems to have been less than secure, and he needed to be provided with shelter from Hákon Þórðarson.

The wife of Hákon, Guðrún Þórðardóttir, is mentioned a few times in *Guðmundar saga dýra* and seems to have been notorious for her promiscuous behaviour. Hákon himself had entered an illicit alliance with her and later killed her husband, following which they were married.¹⁷ In light of this, Hákon should not have been surprised at his wife's infidelity, and indeed he does not seem to have registered any shock at her behaviour; his indignation was reserved for his former client Sigurðr.

Taken altogether, the few references to Sigurðr in *Guðmundar saga dýra* provide the image of an adventurer returning from the Roman Empire shortly before 1200. He is depicted as a valorous fighter and an embodiment of a Christian sense of honour, which was hardly widespread in Iceland at this time. However, he was not a skilled politician and his sexual transgressions and duplicitous behaviour towards a benefactor must have been considered a blot on his reputation.

Sigurðr grikkir disappears from the narrative around 1200, but he left behind one item as a legacy. It is a sword called Brynjubítr ("Mail-biter"), which is mentioned in *Íslendingasaga*, the second source which refers to Sigurðr. It is said that he had brought this sword from Constantinople and at the battle of Víðines in 1208, near the see of Hólar, a man called Sveinn Jónsson was in possession of this sword "and made big cuts with it".¹⁸ In return for his deeds in this battle, Sveinn was executed in 1209.¹⁹ The sword passed into the possession of man named Þorvarðr Örnólfsson who lived at a farm named Mikligarðr, the same as the Old Norse name for

Constantinople, where the sword was located in 1217. At that time, Sturla Sighvatsson, the eighteen-year-old son of a chieftain, gained some notoriety when he tried to take the sword from Þorvarðr, managing to wound him seriously in the process. In this, he was quietly encouraged by his father, who did not consider it expedient to give his son public support but managed to settle the matter quietly.²⁰ Even if Brynjubítr clearly was a good sword, this seems a great deal of effort by Sturla just to acquire a new weapon. However, the possession of a sword from Constantinople was evidently of great symbolic value, worth the trouble of picking a fight with a notable local farmer.

TWELFTH-CENTURY VARANGIAN IDENTITIES

As can be gathered from the examples discussed above, several Norwegians and Icelanders spent some time in Constantinople in the last decades of the twelfth century. Some of these people were quite high ranking, while others were people of no particular note in their homeland. Some of the men probably served the emperor as soldiers, yet none are called Varangians in the Old Norse sources.

It is evident that King Sigurðr's journey to Constantinople had created a long-lasting relationship between the Norwegian royal family and the Roman Empire, which resulted in separate subsequent visits to Constantinople by both his daughter and his son-in-law. Both the armed pilgrims from Orkney in the 1150s and the Danes who arrived late for the Third Crusade in the 1190s considered an amicable visit to the Roman emperor as an integral part of their pilgrimage. Notable individuals, such as Eindriði the Younger, Eiríkr the son of King Sigurðr, and Hreiðar the Messenger, served the Roman emperors for long periods of time. Even an obscure Icelander such as Sigurðr the Greek could have been in the service of the Emperor and brought an illustrious sword back home as a token of his achievement. The picture which the evidence of the sources paints is that of a close-knit and enduring relationship. Service to most powerful and renowned monarch of Christendom was an intrinsic part of the allure of the armed pilgrimages, known as crusades in modern times, which brought many Scandinavians to the heartland of Christianity in the twelfth century.

The frequency of the visits by Scandinavians to the Roman Empire demonstrates their importance, but the exact nature of the relationship between these visitors and the emperor and of the Roman state as an

institution is open to interpretation. The royal visitors and armed pilgrims who came on semi-official visits to the Roman Empire would have been expected to declare their fealty to the emperor. The messenger sent by Emperor Alexios III in 1196 is an indication that the Roman emperor took these relationships seriously. Even if the Scandinavian monarchs failed to give their support to the Roman emperor on that occasion, as far as we know, the reluctance evidenced by the Norwegian king seems to have been based on circumstances in his homeland at that particular time, rather than any opposition in principle. This fealty can be regarded as similar to the crusading oaths that were undertaken by Scandinavian monarchs in the thirteenth century but never fulfilled. These were obligations that the kings took seriously, even if they were unable bring them to completion.

As for the individuals who entered the service of the Roman Empire, those relations were not part of any official mission, rather they were private undertakings. Nevertheless, any service in the Roman army had to be established on some institutional basis and non-Romans usually served alongside other foreigners, preferably their own countrymen. The most obvious vehicle for any Scandinavians serving the Roman emperor would have been the Varangian Guard, which is well attested in twelfth century Roman sources, in contrast to the rather meagre information provided in earlier accounts. The earliest narrative Old Norse sources do not mention this particular institution. This failure to mention the Varangian Guard does not by itself prove that the Varangian Guard did not exist, nor does it imply that Scandinavians were unaware of its existence. What it does imply is that no particular importance or glamour was accorded to the term “Varangian” in twelfth-century Scandinavia. The authors describing the service of Scandinavians to the Roman emperor placed no particular importance on which army unit they had served in or whether Scandinavians had formed such a unit on their own.

A similar unfamiliarity can be noted in the continued use of the terms “Greeks” for the Romans and “the king of the Greeks” for the Roman emperor. This reflects the traditional Latin usage and is an indication that the returned-Varangians, who knew that they lived in the Roman Empire and served the Roman emperor, had no influence on the writing tradition about the state they had served. An exception might be term “*stólkonungr*,” which is used in *Orkneyinga saga* and later sources and can be regarded as an attempt to invent a particular Old Norse term for the Roman emperor.

The lack of use of terms such as “Varangian” and “the Roman Empire” is an indication of the limited influence that returning Scandinavians had on the debate on these institutions, which made its mark on the written sources. These sources were shaped by native clerical education, which was strongly influenced by the Latin tradition prevalent in the Western part of Christendom. While the narrative sources emanating from the Old Norse cultural tradition were generally positive towards the Roman Empire and the Roman emperor and regarded service to the emperor as a positive achievement, their knowledge of this highly regarded state and its institutions was quite limited. This is one of the main paradoxes of Old Norse-Roman medieval cultural relations.

As stated before, the absence of the term “Varangian” in Old Norse sources dealing with twelfth-century journeys to Constantinople and the Roman Empire is an indication that this particular institution held no particular importance for Old Norse narrators of this relationship. What is paradoxical is that the term was about to gain great importance in depicting this relationship in earlier periods. Following the fall of Constantinople in 1204 and the sharply reduced relations between the Roman Empire and Scandinavia, the term Varangian surfaced in Old Norse legends concerning the important antecedents of this relationship.

NOTES

1. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXX, pp. 192–193.
2. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXX, p. 194.
3. Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *The Book of Ceremonies*, pp. 686–692.
4. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXX, p. 278.
5. *Nicetae Choniatae Historia*, p. 477.
6. Anne Comnène, *Alexiade* II, pp. 109–110, 135, 141.
7. See Ciggaar, *Western Travellers*, pp. 151–153.
8. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXVIII, p. 407.
9. *Íslandske Annaler*, p. 118.
10. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXX, p. 92.
11. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXX, p. 93.
12. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXI, p. 134.
13. *Íslandske Annaler*, pp. 124, 183.

14. *Sturlunga saga* I, p. 194.
15. *Sturlunga saga* I, pp. 198–199.
16. *Sturlunga saga* I, p. 208.
17. *Sturlunga saga* I, pp. 168–171, 198–199.
18. *Sturlunga saga* I, pp. 260–261.
19. *Sturlunga saga* I, p. 253.
20. *Sturlunga saga* I, pp. 260–262.



Icons

THOSE WHO RETURNED

As illustrated in the tale of the sword from Constantinople situated at the northern farm of Mikligarður, artefacts from Constantinople had considerable symbolic value in early thirteenth-century Iceland. However, those who visited or entered the service of the Roman emperor usually were not known as Varangians. In the thirteenth century, a new literary genre developed in Iceland, the family sagas or the sagas of the Icelanders (ON. *Íslendingasögur*), which situated the Varangian past within a specific framework.

The sagas of the Icelanders were literary recreations of the distant past, rather than more recent events, discussing the period from the settlement of Iceland until its Christianization (c. 870–1030). They were central to the development of the Icelanders' cultural memory in that the focus was on the foundation of Icelandic society, rather than its later evolution. As the settlement and the life of the first generations of Icelanders are in the forefront, there is a thematic link between this genre and *The Book of Settlements* (ON. *Landnámabók*), parts of which were composed in the early twelfth century but was then rewritten in three versions between 1270 and 1320. Within these literary works, the origin-legend of the Icelanders was solidified. The thirteenth-century versions of *Landnámabók* were probably very different from the original, laconic form, which would have resembled a list rather than a narrative. This is partly due to the

influence of the sagas of the Icelanders, the earliest of which were probably composed in the first half of the thirteenth century.

Both *Landnámabók* and the sagas of the Icelanders are based on oral tradition regarding genealogies and the foundation of important families. In their finalized version, however, they were a literary recreation of the past in a narrative form. The settlement and the Christianization of Iceland were the two major events which give these narratives their historical dimension. Within this reconstructed past, the experiences of the Icelandic Varangians became an important topos.

Around 1220, an Icelandic kings' saga was composed, later known as *Morkinskinna*. Its subject is the history of Norwegian kings between 1035 and 1157. The earliest section of the work describes the travels of King Haraldr to the realm of Prince Iaroslav of Rus and the Roman Empire in some detail. It uses both the Haraldr's court poets' skaldic verses, which had been preserved orally, and was also infused with romantic legends about Haraldr's strategic genius, his rivalry with the Roman General George Maniakes, and his romantic liaison with a Roman princess named Maria. This material is mostly legendary and demonstrates the living oral tradition concerning Haraldr's exploits in the service of the Roman emperor.¹ As in other sections of *Morkinskinna*, it heavily emphasized the role of Icelanders. It describes Haraldr's incognito arrival in Constantinople, where "a great multitude of Norsemen were already there and were called Varangians [*Veringjar*]. There was an Icelander named Már, who was the son of Húnröðr and the father of Hafliði Másson. He was a distinguished leader of men".² Már then tried to investigate the group by speaking to an Icelander in the retinue of Haraldr, Halldórr Snorrason, who did not oblige him. Not much further is said concerning these Icelanders, but it should be noted that they were the ancestors of prominent twelfth-century leaders. Hafliði, the son of Már, was responsible for the earliest codification of the Icelandic law in 1118 and was one of the most important Icelandic chieftains of his era.³ Halldórr was the maternal grandfather of Þórðr Gilsson, a contemporary of Hafliði and the ancestor of the powerful Sturlungar clan. The relationship of these two venerable ancestors to King Haraldr must have been an important part of the oral tradition within these great families, although there is not much specific detail pertaining to their sojourn in Constantinople.

Later in the narrative, it states that, due to his amorous liaison with Maria, Haraldr "was thrown into the dungeon together with two of his men, Úlfr the chamberlain and Halldórr Snorrason".⁴ Although this tale is

an oral legend, the important point in the context is that both of these two named followers of Haraldr were Icelanders. However, the family of Úlfr Óspaksson, the chamberlain of Haraldr, had remained in Norway and he was the ancestor of Archbishop Eysteinn of Nidaros (r. 1161–1188). Thus, we have two Icelandic families, one also Norwegian, connected to the narrative of King Haraldr's adventures in the Roman Empire.

There are no Icelandic sagas demonstrably older than *Morkinskinna*. In fact, the evolution of this genre has often been traced from small episodes (*þettir*) embedded in the narrative of this kings' saga, which is very much concerned with the relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian kings. The Varangians are introduced as a group generally not known to the putative audience of the saga. This may be a literary convention but might also stem from the fact that the term had not been of common use for the Norsemen who entered the emperor's service in the twelfth century. In the sagas of the Icelanders, however, its use was to become very common.

There is no general consensus on which of the sagas are the oldest. Among the sagas which indisputably belong to the oldest group is *Laxdæla saga*, which is devoted to events in the Western Quarter (ON. *Vestfirðingafjórðungr*) of Iceland and concerns Icelanders of an earlier generation than Halldórr Snorrason, Úlfr Óspaksson, and Már Húnröðarson. As is common with oral tradition, the narratives become more detailed and informative as the events depicted go further back in time.

The last section of *Laxdæla saga* is devoted to the political alliance between the chieftain Snorri Þorgrímsson of Sælingsdalstunga and Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir of Helgafell. Both had familial connections to King Haraldr's Icelandic followers, as Snorri was the father of Halldórr Snorrason and Guðrún was the paternal aunt of Úlfr Óspaksson. These two men play little role in the narrative, but rather the focus is on the son of Guðrún, Bolli Bollason, who married Þórdís, the daughter of Snorri, and was later to inherit his farm at Sælingsdalstunga.

In *Laxdæla saga* there is an episode devoted to the foreign travels of Bolli Bollason, dated to the last years of King Ólafr of Norway (d. 1030). According to the saga, Bolli told his father-in-law that he for a long time been thought "to go for once into southern lands; for a man is deemed to grow benighted if he learns to know nothing farther afield than what is to be seen here in Iceland".⁵ He then travelled to the royal courts of Norway and Denmark where he was granted great respect. It is then related:

When Bolli had spent a winter in Denmark, he started on his journey out into foreign countries and did not halt in his journey till he came to Mikligarðr (Constantinople). He was there only a short time before he got himself into the Varangian Guard, and, from what we have heard, no Norseman had ever gone to take commission from the king there before Bolli Bollason. He tarried in Constantinople for many winters, and was thought to be the most valiant in all deeds that try a man, and always went next to those in the forefront. The Varangians esteemed Bolli most highly whilst he was with them in Constantinople.⁶

It is not known whether the adventures of Bolli's kinsmen, Halldórr and Úlfr, were known to the author of *Laxdæla saga*, but it seems likely, as it concerned the same family. It could be argued that the tale of Bolli serves as a sort of foundation legend for the Varangian presence in Constantinople, which is introduced in *Morkinskinna*. The description of Bolli's return to Iceland around 1030 has clear echoes of the description of King Haraldr's wealth, as it is depicted in *Morkinskinna*:

Bolli brought out with him much wealth, and many precious things that lords abroad had given him. Bolli was so great a man for show when he came back from this journey that he would wear no clothes but of scarlet and silk, and all his weapons were adorned with gold. He was called Bolli the courteous. He made it known to his shipmates that he was going west to his own countryside, and he left his ship and goods in the hands of his crew. Bolli rode from the ship with twelve men, and all his followers were dressed in scarlet, and rode on gilt saddles, and all were they a comely band, though Bolli was peerless among them. He had on the clothes of silk which the Emperor had given him, he had over all a scarlet cape; and he had the sword Footbiter girt on him, the hilt of which was adorned with gold, and the grip woven with gold, he had a gilded helmet on his head, and a red shield on his flank, with a knight painted on it in gold. He had a dagger in his hand, as is the custom in foreign lands; and whenever they took quarters the women could do naught else than gaze at Bolli and his grandeur, and that of his followers.⁷

This description of a Varangian's return is comprised of elements that occur in earlier narratives. The adorned sword, in this case Bolli's inheritance from his father, is reminiscent of the actual swords brought to Iceland from Constantinople and coveted by the best among men. The wealth and manners of Bolli and his followers bring to mind the immense wealth of the Norwegian king Haraldr, as described in the earlier

narratives which are set a few decades later. As the saga is composed around 220 years after this event, the historicity of the episode is open to doubt and Bolli's journey to Constantinople and his service among the Varangians are not mentioned in any other narratives than *Laxdæla saga*. What we have here instead is an idealized picture of a Varangian's return, as imagined by and as it appeared to later generations. The return of Bolli makes up for all the lost tales of how persons such as Halldórr Snorrason and Úlfr Óspaksson would have been seen on their return from the great metropolis. This is how it all began, according to *Laxdæla saga*.

There was no unified agreement of who had been the earliest Norseman to serve among the Varangians. In *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, usually regarded as an early thirteenth century text, there appears a wealthy man named Grís Sæmingsson who lived at a farm called Geitaskarð, an important local centre in the thirteenth century. Grís was married to a woman named Kolfinna, whom the poet Hallfreðr had made the object of his affection. This resulted in a rivalry between the two of them. According to the saga, Grís had been in Constantinople and had received great honour there. The end of the rivalry, according to the saga, can be dated to the year 999, as Hallfreðr became depressed when he heard about the death of his former lord, King Ólafr Tryggvason. Grís empathized with him as he had suffered from a similar emotional trauma when his lord, the emperor, had died.⁸

Grís Sæmingsson is mentioned in other sources, such as *Landnámabók* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, but his stay in Constantinople is only mentioned in *Hallfreðar saga*, which offers very little detail on his career there. Evidently, he had served the Roman emperor several decades before Bolli Bollason, which indicates that there were several versions afloat concerning who had been the first Norseman to join the service of the emperor.⁹ Following earlier practice, Grís is not called a Varangian, which demonstrates that the term had not gained much ground in the early thirteenth century. In one fourteenth-century manuscript version of *Hallfreðar saga*, Grís is depicted carrying a sword given to him by the emperor, a common topos in stories about Varangians.¹⁰

The extensive depiction of Bolli Bollason in *Laxdæla saga* and the laconic portrayal of Grís Sæmingsson share some important features. They are both depicted as wealthy men who had gained much honour through their stay in Constantinople and their association with the Roman emperor. Having been a Varangian was considered enough achievement in itself, rendering descriptions of further exploits redundant.

Following *Laxdæla saga* and *Hallfredar saga*, the Varangian became a stock figure of the family sagas. Although these Varangians were probably regarded as historical personages by the saga authors, and have often been treated as such in later scholarship, they should rather be regarded as ideal types and a part of the “debate of the Varangian.” The image of the Varangian gained certain stereotypical features as the Varangians became solidified in the cultural memory of medieval Iceland.

THE RESTLESS VARANGIAN

Episodes in the sagas of the Icelanders concerning Varangians can be divided into two main types, one involves a Varangian who has returned from Constantinople and the other a saga character who moves to Constantinople at the end of his or her life. The episodes that deal with Varangians who have returned to their homeland after a period of service under the emperor illustrate the situation a person faces after spending years abroad in a land far, far away. It seems that the increase in social status and respect achieved by Bolli Bollason and Grís Sæmingsson was not the only possible outcome for a returned Varangian, and indeed some could experience tougher situations.

Hrafnkels saga, a late medieval text which was composed no earlier than in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, deals with a feud between two people from the Eastern Quarter of Iceland in the late tenth century, Hrafnkell Freysgoði and Sámr Bjarnason. Hrafnkell is also mentioned in *Landnámabók* where he is ranked among the most illustrious settlers of the Eastern Quarter.¹¹ In contrast, Sámr is not mentioned in other sources and may be an invented antagonist for Hrafnkell. At the beginning of the saga, Sámr’s brother named Eyvindr is also mentioned:

Eyvindr became a travelling merchant, and went to Norway, where he dwelt for [the first] winter. From there he went abroad into foreign lands and stayed in Constantinople, where he was accorded great honour by the king of the Greeks (ON. *Grikkjakonungr*) and stayed there for a while.¹²

Later the saga states that Eyvindr returned home after he had stayed “abroad for seven winters all in all. Eyvindr had improved himself greatly as to education in manners, and had now become a most valiant man”.¹³ It can be inferred that the improvement in Eyvindr’s manner was due to his stay in Constantinople and his service to the Roman emperor. However,

he does not benefit from this in the saga, as he is killed by Hrafnkell in revenge for his humiliation by Sámr. Because of his improved status, Eyvindr had become a more enticing target for his brother's enemies.¹⁴

Eyvindr is not the only person in *Hrafnkels saga* who had been to Constantinople. Earlier in the saga, Sámr tried to prosecute Hrafnkell at the general assembly (ON. *alþingi*) of Iceland, but initially had little success. Then his fortune changed as he encountered a man from the Western Quarter, Þorkell Þjóstarsson. On his first appearance, Sámr saw him from some distance:

Then they saw how, on the western side of the river, only a bit further down from where they were sitting, five men were walking together out of a certain booth. He who was at the head of them was a tall man, not of a stout build, arrayed in a leaf-green kirtle, in his hand an ornamented sword. He was a man with regular features and ruddy of hue, and of a goodly presence, with light-auburn and abundant hair. This was a man easily recognizable, as he had a light lock in his hair on the left side.¹⁵

The man thus described is introduced and turns out to be the brother of a chieftain from the Western Quarter. He himself, however, claims to be neither a chieftain nor a farmer:

I am only a singleton (ON. *einbleypingr*). I came out here last summer, having been for seven winters abroad. I went to Constantinople, where I am now a retainer of the King of the City [Garðskonungr]. Currently I am staying with my brother, whose name is Þorgeirr.¹⁶

It turns out Þorgeirr was able to be of much assistance to Sámr, but the point of interest here is that Þorkell describes himself with a word usually denoting vagabonds or people of no steady employment. Such men were usually depicted either as ruffians who preyed on farmers or members of armies that harassed the countryside during the long period of strife in Iceland known as the Sturlunga Age, (ON. *Sturlungaöld*, 1220–1262). This seems an ignoble way to describe a man who had been, and still seemed to be, in the employ of the Roman emperor. It should be understood that Þorkell was not very pleased with his current situation, coming back from such distinguished service only to become a member of his brother's household. It is hardly a coincidence that the years that Þorkell and Eyvindr spent abroad are the same, seven years.

At the end of the saga, when Sámr had lost his brother without gaining any compensation and been relegated to inferior social status by Hrafnkell, he again sought Þorgeirr and Þorkell's assistance: "At that time Þorkell had just arrived from a journey abroad, having spent four winters altogether abroad".¹⁷ It is not stated whether he had returned to Constantinople, but evidently he had no wish to settle in Iceland.

Just like Sámr and Eyvindr, Þorkell and Þorgeirr are not mentioned in any other sources. Their brother, Þormóðr Þjóstarsson, is mentioned in the saga and he is also known from *Landnámabók*, but that text does not mention any of his brothers.¹⁸ One should assume that *Hrafnkels saga's* author had a relatively free hand in his description of Þorkell and his situation.

Eyvindr Bjarnason and Þorkell Þjóstarsson are examples of a Varangian stereotype different than Bolli Bollason and Grís Sæmingsson. The honour accorded to them by the Roman emperor did not easily translate into improved social status in their own country. Eyvindr's increased status made him a target for his brother's vengeful enemies and Þorkell appears as a restless character with no social foothold in Iceland.

A VARANGIAN ENDING

The ideal picture of the Varangian was that of a man of high social standing who had received honour through his association with the Roman emperor, often manifested by an artefact such as a sword, which had been used in the service of the emperor. The dark side of the Varangian experience is also apparent in the examples from *Hrafnkels saga*. A Varangian who had returned could prove restless and unable to find a foothold in his home country, and he could also have a target on his back as a high-priced object of vengeance in a feuding society. There were also other ideal types of the Varangians in the saga literature, one of which was service to the Roman Empire as an ultimate life goal.

It was a well-known fact in the thirteenth century that not all Varangians had managed to return after their period of service to the Roman emperor. The fate of these Varangians is depicted in several sagas. *Heiðarvíga saga* is generally considered one of the earlier sagas, it seems to have been composed earlier than *Laxdæla saga*, or relatively soon afterwards, but it has been badly preserved. In several examples from *Heiðarvíga saga*, Constantinople is presented as a destination, rather than as a place where people are coming from. The first example involves a classic case of feud

and revenge. Soon after the advent of Christianity in Iceland, a rowdy but well-born farmer named Víga-Styrr (Styrr the Slayer) is killed in a feat of vengeance by a youth named Gestr Þórhallason. Gestr's kinsmen sent him abroad to Norway, but he is chased by Þorsteinn, the son of Styrr. To escape this avenger, he travels to Constantinople where he joins the Varangians. Þorsteinn follows him to Constantinople and tries to assassinate him here, but only manages to wound him slightly. Þorsteinn is then captured and is sentenced to death, according to the laws of the Varangians. Gestr manages to intercede on his behalf and gives half of his property to ensure that Þorsteinn is spared. Þorsteinn then promises to stop trying to assassinate him and returns to Iceland, but Gestr remains there and it is said that he never again returned to the northern lands (ON. *Norðrlönd*).¹⁹ Gestr is portrayed sympathetically in the saga and, even if he became a permanent exile from Iceland, it is implied that his residence among the Varangians is a good ending for such a distinguished warrior.

At the end of *Heiðarvíga saga*, a second person is said to have joined the Varangians, Barði Guðmundarson. According to the saga he was married to Auðr, the daughter of the chieftain Snorri Þorgrímsson. Auðr was the sister of Halldórr, who had accompanied King Haraldr to Constantinople, and of Þórdís, the wife of Bolli Bollason. Barði was thus a member of a family well known for its Varangian connections. According to *Heiðarvíga saga*, Barði divorced Auðr after she had thrown a stone at him and left the country and joined the Varangians:

and all the Northmen held him of great account, and he was loved among them. Always, when the king's realm was to be defended, he was on the expedition, gaining good renown from his valiance, and keeping with him a great company of men. There Barði spent three winters, being much honoured by the king and all the Varangians. But once it happened, as they were out on their galleys with a host and still defending the king's realm, that there fell a host upon them; and there was a great battle, and many of the king's men were killed, as they had to fight against an overwhelming force, though they wrought great deeds before. And there Barði was slain with good renown, having used his weapons valiantly until death.²⁰

As in the episode with Gestr, the Roman Empire appears to be the final destination of Barði. There he acquires an honourable end to a restless existence, rather than prestige which could be used to improve his social standing in Iceland.

In *Heiðarvígga saga*, entering the service of the Roman emperor serves a different kind of narrative device than it does in texts such as *Laxdæla saga*, *Hallfredar saga*, or *Hrafnkels saga*. It is not the means to an end, but rather an end in itself. An even more celebrated episode of this kind occurs in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where the protagonist is Kolskeggr, the brother of the ill-fated hero Gunnar of Hlíðarendi. Following a long-lived feud, these noble and courageous brothers were sentenced to serve three years each in exile. Gunnar, however, decides to ignore the sentence and is consequently killed by his enemies. His brother, who is also depicted as a valiant warrior but one that is usually more cautious, had a very different end:

Now it is said of Kolskeggr that he arrived in Norway, and was in the east, in Viken, that winter. But the following summer he fared east to Denmark, and was bound to Sveinn Forkbeard the king, and there he had great honour. One night he dreamt that a man came to him; he was illuminated, and he thought he had woken him up. He said to him: "Arise and go with me." "What wilt thou with me?" he asked. "I will get thee a bride, and thou shalt be my knight." He thought he agreed to that, and after that he woke up. Then he went to a wise man and told him the dream, and that one interpreted it so that he should fare to southern lands and become a knight of God. Kolskeggr was baptized in Denmark, but still he was restless there, and fared east to the Rus [Garðaríki], and dwelt there one winter. Then he fared thence out to Constantinople and there entered the service of the emperor. The last that was heard of him was that he was married there and was captain over a team of Varangians, and remained there till he died; and he, too, is out of this story.²¹

The depiction of Kolskeggr in *Brennu-Njáls saga* is positive throughout the saga and there can be no doubt that this is a fitting end for the life of a good man. The text is ambiguous in the sense that the bride of Kolskeggr is both the wife that he acquired in Constantinople and also that he was married to God in his role as a knight of God. The episode is replete with crusading ideology, with the Varangians evidently regarded as precursors to contemporary military orders, such as the Knights Templar.²²

THE ROMANCE OF THE VARANGIANS

As a part of the cultural memory of medieval Icelanders, Varangians appear in the sagas of the Icelanders in several roles. Most of the sagas are set in the decades before and after the introduction of Christianity in Iceland, an

event which has traditionally been dated to the year 999. The Christianization then serves as a chronological and structural turning point for the sagas, creating a divide between the old pagan times and the new and improved customs introduced by the Christian faith. It is evident that, as a history of particular events, the sagas are of limited value since the action takes place two or three hundred years before the time of their composition. However, it so happens that this chronological structure places the action of the sagas within the period when the Varangian Guard had been at its peak, at least from the point of view of later saga writers. It thus became a common narrative device to locate characters, who for some reason had to be removed from the thrust of the action in Iceland, to the court of the most glorious monarch in Christendom, the Roman emperor. There, these characters' exploits were not usually listed in much detail, as it could be taken for granted that they had been exalted by serving such a noble master.

If they are of little value as actual sources concerning the fate of particular individuals, what is the historical value of the Varangian episodes in the sagas of the Icelanders? Are they nothing more than literary *topoi*? This is not the case, as literary stereotypes are the product of the thought processes and discourses within a particular society. The reason why the Varangian motif was so popular in this particular genre is connected to the position of the Roman Empire within the prevalent worldview of medieval Icelanders, and, to a large degree, of other Scandinavians as well.

In the cultural memory of thirteenth century Iceland, the period of the Varangian Guard became a precursor to the era of the crusades. Prominent families from the west of Iceland played a leading role in the commemoration of that past, as people from those families could actually be connected to King Haraldr of Norway, the archetypical Varangian in Scandinavian cultural memory. But the Varangian past served its purpose for narrators of history from all of Iceland, as a few common archetypes came to dominate the debate on the Varangians.

NOTES

1. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 293–309.
2. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIII, p. 89.
3. See Hoff, *Haflíði Másson und die Einflüsse des römischen Rechts in der Grágás*.
4. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIII, p. 109.

5. *Íslenzk fornrit* V, p. 211.
6. *Íslenzk fornrit* V, pp. 214–215.
7. *Íslenzk fornrit* V, pp. 224–225.
8. *Íslenzk fornrit* VIII, pp. 144, 192–193.
9. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, p. 746.
10. *Íslenzk fornrit* VIII, p. 191.
11. *Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. 299, 336, 396, 397.
12. *Íslenzk fornrit* XI, p. 100.
13. *Íslenzk fornrit* XI, p. 125.
14. *Íslenzk fornrit* XI, pp. 125–130.
15. *Íslenzk fornrit* XI, pp. 110–111.
16. *Íslenzk fornrit* XI, p. 111.
17. *Íslenzk fornrit* XI, p. 132.
18. *Íslenzk fornrit* XI, pp. 111–112; *Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. 58, 59, 78, 79, 157, 168, 332, 354.
19. *Íslenzk fornrit* III, pp. 232–244.
20. *Íslenzk fornrit* III, p. 328.
21. *Íslenzk fornrit* XII, p. 197.
22. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 751–752.



Empire

MONUMENTS OF UN-AGEING INTELLECT

In Old Norse, Constantinople had its own name, *Mikligarðr*, a name reminiscent of other major cities in the East such as *Hólmgarðr* (Novgorod) and *Kenugarðr* (Kiev). The suffix *garðr* (similar to *-grad*, *-gorod* in Slavonic languages) was mainly used for the names of eastern cities, although it is of ancient Indo-European origin and can also be seen in names of cities in other Germanic languages (e.g. Stuttgart in Swabia).

The word is not common in eleventh-century runic inscriptions, but it can be found in skaldic poetry from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. As already noted, Þógværkr Arnórsson used the word in his *drápa* which he dedicated to King Haraldr. The term thus occurs in some of the earliest preserved Old Norse texts, but it seems to belong to the West Nordic, rather than the East Nordic, cultural sphere. In the kings' sagas and sagas of the Icelanders previously discussed, it became the most common term used to denote Constantinople.

A common theme in Old Norse depictions of Constantinople is its immense wealth. In Þógværkr's poem, "metal-roofed Constantinople" seems to form a contrast to less prosperous Scandinavian cities. This theme is significantly emphasized in *Eiríksdrápa* with its depiction of the Danish King Eiríkr receiving "weighty wealth in red gold, half a *lest*, from the lord himself" in the city known as Mikligarðr.¹ This theme endured throughout the early thirteenth-century kings' sagas, in which splendid gift-giving

by the emperor forms an important part of the narrative of the twelfth-century armed pilgrimages.

There are, however, very few detailed descriptions of Constantinople in the Old Norse narratives. One of the most detailed is in *Morkinskinna*, a kings' saga composed around 1220, in which the armed pilgrimage of King Sigurðr is depicted, more than a century after the event itself:

Emperor Kirjalax [Alexios I] had heard of King Sigurðr and had the gate of Constantinople that is called Gullvarta (the Golden Gate) opened. That is the gate through which the emperor rides when he has been away on campaign for a long time and has won the victory. The emperor had precious fabrics spread on the streets from Gullvarta to Laktjarnir (Blachernai), the emperor's grandest residence.²

This description is evidently composed by a person who had either been to Constantinople or had communicated with people who had. As previously mentioned, such people had lived in Norway and Iceland around 1200, so the narrator might have had access to informants who had spent some time in the metropolis.

In the remainder of the description of his stay in Constantinople it is described how the emperor organized games at the hippodrome to honour Sigurðr, and the arena is described in some detail:

Those who have been in Constantinople say that the hippodrome is constructed in such a way that there is a high wall enclosing a field that might be compared with a huge circular farmland. There are tiers along the wall for people to sit on while the games are played on the field. The walls are decorated with all sorts of ancient events. You can find the *Æsir*, *Völsungar* and *Gjúkungar* fashioned in copper and iron with such great skill that they seem alive. With this arrangement people have the impression that they are participants in the games. The games are staged with great ingenuity and visual deception so that men look as though they are riding in the air. There are also displays of fireworks, to some extent with magical effects. In addition, there are all sorts of musical instruments, psalteries, organs, harps, violins, and fiddles, and all sorts of stringed instruments.³

Again, this description is based on the testimony of eye-witnesses, probably the same ones responsible for the earlier description of the city. The Icelandic or Norwegian observers recognized scenes from Old Norse mythology in the decorations at the hippodrome, although it could be

plausibly argued that such decorations would more likely have been scenes from Greco-Roman mythology or Christian legends.

An Icelander writing in the early thirteenth century could easily draw on eyewitness testimony to describe the highlights of Constantinople. The description in *Morkinskinna* is a mostly secular one, focusing on the riches and the splendour of the imperial city. It is interesting to note that the decorations in the hippodrome were seen as repositories of the ancient past of the Scandinavians, the legends of the migration period. Constantinople was an important *lieu de memoire*, an ancient city where history was preserved.

In another type of text, the focus would rather be on Christian history and artefacts connected to that history. In Old Norse descriptions of the world, Constantinople is generally considered one of the chief Christian cities, alongside Jerusalem and Rome. The ecclesiastical world history *Stjórn*, composed in the reign of King Hákon of Norway (r. 1299–1319), opens with a description of the world in which Constantinople is said to be “that city which Norsemen call Mikligarðr [...] which in its great power and merit is in many ways equal to Rome itself”.⁴ In a world-description preserved in two fourteenth-century manuscripts, holy relics in Constantinople are extensively documented and connected to the history of the world. Among the relics described are the various items belonging to such Old Testament saints such as Moses, Joshua, King David, and the Prophet Elijah, but also an abundance of relics connected to the apostles and evangelists, as well as items associated with the passion of Christ. Among the items listed are the head of John the Baptist, the hand of Saint Paul, the head and finger of the Apostle Thomas, the head of the Apostle Matthew, the head of Gregory the Illuminator, the apostle of Armenia, hair of Gregory of Nazianzos, and Christ himself: “There the great king Constantine rests and his mother Helen and many other emperors. In Mikligarðr there are the clothes Christ was swaddled in and the gold that the magicians brought him and lots of other holy items”.⁵ Thus, the relics of Constantinople are a meticulous manifestation of the Christian salvation history.

In Old Norse texts, Constantinople was not only a city of wealth and abundance and one of the holiest cities in the world, but also a place of memory where world history, both secular and spiritual, was omnipresent. This was in addition to its unique role as an imperial residence, which was probably the most important attribute of the great city.

THE GREATEST LORD IN CHRISTENDOM

As evidenced by Old Norse itineraries, pilgrimages to Constantinople held an important religious function, as it was one of the three holy cities of Christendom. In addition, Constantinople also held a decidedly secular appeal as it was the capital of the Roman Empire and the residence of one of the greatest monarchs in the world. Thus, descriptions of armed pilgrimages in the kings' sagas devote much more space to the visit of the lord in question to Constantinople, in contrast to rather brief accounts of trips to Jerusalem. Thus, the trips known as *Jórsalaferðir* (literally: Voyages to Jerusalem) generally seem to revolve around the stop made by the royal armed pilgrims in Constantinople.

What exactly was the status of the monarch of Constantinople, as he was depicted in Old Norse sources? In most of the sagas, he is known by one of three terms, *Grikkjakonungr* (King of the Greeks), *Garðskonungr* (King of the City, i.e. Mikligarðr) and *stólkonungr*. These terms could be used interchangeably. For instance, in *Hallfreðar saga*, the Roman emperor is known as *Garðskonungr* in one of the major manuscripts of the saga, but as *stólkonungr* in the other main manuscript.

In the eleventh-century runic inscriptions, the term “Grikkland” (Greece) is a fairly ubiquitous word used to depict the Roman Empire, reflecting a general Latin and Old Slavonic use. However, some of the saga authors might have wished to distance themselves from that term, perhaps in the knowledge that the emperor in Constantinople was the monarch of the Roman Empire, rather than of the Greeks. If so, *Garðskonungr* was a more neutral term connecting the monarch with the capital of his empire, akin to modern-day use of the term Byzantine emperor to denote the Roman emperor.

A more intricate word used to describe the Roman emperor is the term “*stólkonungr*”, which is used for the emperor in the twelfth-century world-chronicle *Veraldarsaga* and early thirteenth-century kings' sagas such as *Morkinskinna* and *Orkneyinga saga*. It can also be found in skaldic poetry and might even be of ancient provenance. The term is only used to describe the Roman emperor and no other monarch, although it is also used to denote God (who is called “*stólkonungr sólar*” in the twelfth-century *Ólafsdrápa*).⁶ The meaning of the word is not clear, but it can be connected with the Greek term *στόλος* indicating “equipment”, “fleet” or “expedition” and also the Old Slavonic term *стольный князь* (“high king”).⁷ This is not the only instance that used terminology that associated

the Roman emperor with the divine. In the early thirteenth-century *Skáldskaparmál*, a part of *Snorra Edda*, one of the kennings used to describe Christ is “Grickia konungr” (king of the Greeks).⁸

Even if the respect accorded to Roman emperors was great, knowledge about Roman emperors was sporadic. Due to the participations of Scandinavian kings and noblemen in armed pilgrimages, the emperors of the twelfth century were well known and frequently mentioned, in particular Alexios I (r. 1081–1118; usually called “Kirjalax,” for Kyrie Alexios, in Old Norse sources) and Manuel I (r. 1143–1180). Much less was known about the predecessors of these emperors.

Morkinskinna mentions two eleventh-century emperors who were contemporaries of King Haraldr, Michael IV (r. 1034–1041) and Constantine IX (r. 1042–1055). However, most of the information in *Morkinskinna* about these kings deviates from the known facts about these emperors. Michael is called by the nickname “Katalactus”, not known in any other sources, and Constantine Monomakhos is simply known as Emperor Munak.⁹ As has already been noted, Haraldr is credited with having blinded the latter, a fabrication which might be a confused version of an earlier legend.

Thus, with a few exceptions, very little was known about the Roman emperors who had a relationship with the Rus in the ninth and tenth centuries and the Varangians in the eleventh century. The main exception is the encyclopaedic work *Codex Reseniani* from the third quarter of the thirteenth century, which is generally attributed to the historian Sturla Þórðarson (1214–1284). There we have a list of Roman emperors until the time of Manuel I.¹⁰ This is reflected in Sturla’s other works, including his version of *Landnámabók* which mentions Leo VI (r. 886–912) and his “son” Alexander (in fact his brother), as having been Roman emperors during the settlement of Iceland.¹¹ Thus, efforts were being made by Icelandic medieval historians to gain a more thorough understanding of the history of the Roman emperor. In that context, it is noteworthy that the list of emperors was not continued into Sturla’s own time, and no mention was made of the sack of Constantinople in 1204 or the later division of the empire between the Latin emperors in Constantinople and various Hellenic rivals to the throne. It seems that the Roman Empire of most interest to thirteenth-century Icelanders was the powerful monarchy of the past, rather than its fractious contemporary descendants.

In the aforementioned twelfth-century chronicle *Veraldarsaga*, the discord between Eastern and Western Christendom is defined as political and

it is stated that, from the eighth century, “the Romans seceded from the emperors in Constantinople ... From then on, the emperor (ON. stólkonungr) in Constantinople and the emperor in Saxony have claimed authority over one another”.¹² Thus, the division in Christendom is explained as a rivalry between secular powers. However, from that point on in *Veraldarsaga*, only the Saxon emperors are listed, thus placing the Old Norse world firmly within the sphere of influence of the Saxon emperors.¹³

A similar dichotomy occurs in an episode in *Morkinskinna* and other thirteenth-century kings’ sagas which recount the disputes of the Norwegian King Haraldr with troops in the service of the Roman emperor, who were led by George Maniakes (d. 1043), a kinsman of Empress Zoe. According to these sources, there was a power struggle between Maniakes and Harald which only ended when Haraldr left the army “and with him, all the Varangians and other Latin people but Gyrgir [George] and the others went with the Greek army”.¹⁴ Here we have a conflict in which Latins and Greeks are the main antagonists within the Roman army, with the Varangians situated in the Latin camp. However, this incident is not in itself an indication of a political schism, and it is hardly typical of the status of the Varangians within the Roman army.

Even if such instances of friction do occur in narratives dealing with the eastern voyages, the emphasis was mostly on the positive relationship between Scandinavian monarchs and the Roman emperor, and overwhelmingly on the status of that relationship up and until the thirteenth century. In thirteenth-century Icelandic annals, there is no mention of various Latin and Greek pretenders to the imperial throne in Constantinople. Its capture by Latin armies in 1204 was therefore basically ignored by the Icelanders who chose instead to dwell on the glorious past, rather than the confusing present.

THE EMPEROR AS A CHARACTER WITNESS

As a character in the Old Norse sagas, the Roman emperor has few individual characteristics. Rather, he plays the role of a witness to the honour and prowess of his Scandinavian visitors. The elaborate description of King Eiríkr’s crusade in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus is a case in point. In both Saxo’s tale of Eiríkr and *Morkinskinna*’s tale of Sigurðr, the ultimate message is that the Scandinavian kings wished to demonstrate their strength to the emperor, while at the same time remaining friends and allies.

Both *Gesta Danorum* and *Morkinskinna* also offer accounts of King Haraldr's stay in Constantinople which culminate in him getting into trouble with the Roman emperor. According to Saxo, King Haraldr was accused of murder and thrown into a dungeon where a mighty dragon lived. Haraldr had concealed a small knife on his person and managed to stab the dragon in its only vulnerable spot. According to Saxo, the Danish King Valdemar (r. 1157–1182) later came into the possession of this knife and would often show it to his friends, although by that time the knife had become rusty. Haraldr was thus rewarded by the emperor for his bravery and forgiven for his ill-deeds.¹⁵ In an earlier version, related by William of Malmesbury, Haraldr had strangled a lion in Constantinople but a dragon must have seemed a more compelling monster for a Scandinavian audience.¹⁶

Morkinskinna, however, offers a more complicated account of the story of the serpent. According to that source, Haraldr had committed two offenses against the emperor, neither of them murder. He had taken a larger portion of the gold that belonged to the emperor than which was sanctioned by the law and he had made advances to the niece of Queen Zoe, Maria, and had asked for her hand in marriage. According to *Morkinskinna*, "people who had been in Constantinople within memory of the Varangians state that Zoe herself wanted him." As in the narrative of Saxo, Haraldr killed the serpent, this time with the help of his Icelandic companions. He was then saved from the dungeon through a miracle involving his brother, Saint Ólafr, and an ailing widow, who lets him out. It is then related how he blinded the Roman emperor and kidnapped the maiden Maria, but later released her and sent her back to Constantinople.¹⁷ This is the only episode in which the relationship between the Nordic king and the Roman emperor became truly antagonistic, although the emperor himself was not given the chief blame for the hostilities. The jealousy of Queen Zoe and the avarice of King Haraldr, who retains the character of an anti-hero throughout the narrative, are the main reasons for these hostilities.

In the sagas of the Icelanders, the Roman emperor is usually not cast in such a hostile role. He is mainly depicted as a generous employer who contributes to the honour of the characters involved. In very few cases, the emperor himself makes an appearance, and then his role is usually to attest the protagonist's abilities, in a similar manner as the Roman emperor acknowledging Haraldr's slaying of the dragon in Saxo's narrative.

In the episode of Þormóður Indriðason in *Flateyjarbók*, the Icelandic protagonist escapes from Norway during the time of King Haraldr following a vengeance killing, and then travels to Constantinople where he is initially rejected from entry into the Varangian Guard on account of his diminutive size. It is only when the emperor notices his prowess with an axe, when he cuts off the head of a bull with a single blow, that the decision is reversed and it is claimed that Þormóður was in the service of the emperor for a long time.¹⁸

Another legend of a similar type is the account of *Finnboga saga ramma*, in which the protagonist travels to “Grikkland” (Greece) to seek redress from a person who owed money to his lord, Earl Hákon. He is received honourably by the monarch, who is called Jón [i.e. John], and it is stated that “Greece was then a most Christian country.” After Finnbogi gains compensation, he demonstrates his strength to the King of Greece by carrying a bench on which the king was sitting with twelve of his courtiers, following which he received great gifts from the king and the nickname “the strong,” (ON. *rammi*) which the king predicted would last as long the world was inhabited.¹⁹

The image of the Roman emperor in Old Norse texts is mostly characterized by his role in attesting to the prowess of the Scandinavian protagonists, who are the focus of the narrative. It was by no means an insignificant role, as the honour and nobility within this society was related to how a person was perceived, either by society at large or by a single observer, whose estimation and judgement was beyond questioning. In the Old Norse saga narrative, the emperor often appears in the guise of such a witness.

THE TEACHINGS OF THE EMPEROR

Eiríks saga víðförla was a very popular text in medieval Iceland, as evidenced by the number of existing manuscripts of this saga, which is a mixture of a legendary saga and hagiography and was probably composed in the early fourteenth century.²⁰ It is an entirely fictional account of a prince named Eiríkr from the Kingdom of Prándheimr (Trondheim) in Norway. Eiríkr decides to travel around the world “in search of the place which heathen men call Ódáinsakr, and Christians the Land of Living Folk, or Paradisum”.²¹ He is joined on this journey by a Danish prince, who is also called Eiríkr. Their first stop on this journey was Constantinople, in which

they arrive there just as the Greek king was raising an army to fight against raiders who were making frequent attacks on his realm. And when the king of the Greeks heard of the Norsemen's arrival he asked to see them and received them with honour, asking them who they were and where they came from and which way they were bound. Eiríkr said that they were Norsemen, kings' sons, and that they meant to travel widely, exploring the world. Then the Greek king honoured them exceedingly well in all respects. And when they had been there for some time they performed many great deeds, with boldness and much good sense, and defended the realm of the Greek king very well. And when the king saw that they were stronger than just about any other men in the land, he prized them highest of all and bestowed on them ranks and distinctions and honours, and even took them into his service, and he employed them on the best terms out of all his men. It is said that this was the first time Norsemen took honours out in Mikligarðr.²²

Thus, the story of Eiríkr “the Far-travelled” (*viðförli*) has one dimension, it was an etiological tale intended to explain the origin of the relationship between Scandinavians and the Roman emperor. This is set in a pre-Christian age, but no further information is offered as to when this story is supposed to have taken place. As precursors to all other Scandinavians who served the Roman Empire, the two princes named Eiríkr were thus granted a founding role in the development of a venerable institution.

It is then related that the two princes stayed in Constantinople for three years. Following this sojourn in Constantinople,

they headed with their crew to Syria with the seal of the Greek king, and after that they went by ship and horse—but mostly they walked—journeying some years till they came to furthest India. And wherever they went in strange lands, they were welcomed, and everyone helped them on their way because they had with them the letter and seal of the Greek king and the patriarch from Mikligarðr which was also written in the tongues of all the peoples which they expected to meet on the way. It was also said that wherever they were, or wherever they chose to travel, it was apparent how much God's grace was with them and what a friend of God the Greek king was, for wherever his letter was seen, honours were bestowed upon them and they suffered no harm, for God's mercy protected Eiríkr and his companions, and the fortune of the Greek king was with them, and his wise advice saved them much trouble on the way.²³

Here, both the secular authority and the holiness of the Roman emperor are emphasized. The emperor is honoured as far as the distant reaches of India, but his seal also carried some kind of divine protection. In *Eiríks saga víðförla*, the world is a benign place where Christians were able to travel anywhere and the person who is explicitly responsible for this is the emperor. His role could hardly be more exalted than in this narrative, which was composed at the same time that the power of Roman Empire was on the wane, due to the rise of the Ottoman Turks. At this moment in history, the Old Norse audience of *Eiríks saga víðförla* had turned towards a more comfortable imaginary past when the whole world had obeyed the Roman emperor and Scandinavian lords had their first introduction to Christianity.

This is perhaps the most important role of the Roman emperor in this narrative, the introduction of Christianity. Before Eiríkr leaves Constantinople to travel to India and to look for Paradise on Earth, he receives a lecture in Christian theology from the monarch himself:

It is said that one day Eiríkr of Norway asked the king, “Who made the heaven and the earth?” The king said, “One made them both.” Eirík asked, “Who is that?” The king answered, “God Almighty, who is one God but of three hypostases.” Eiríkr said, “What are these three hypostases?” The king said, “Consider the sun. In it there are three hypostases: fire, brightness and heat, and yet it is all one sun. So also in God: there is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and yet he is one in his omnipotence.”²⁴

The Emperor then goes on to explain to him the difference between this one God and the pagan gods previously worshipped by Eiríkr, who are in fact false idols. As before, Eiríkr proves to be an amiable audience:

Eiríkr said, “I have never heard of anything like this about [heathen gods] before now.” The king said, “That is why your beliefs are mistaken, because you never heard of this, but if you wish to believe in an everlasting God who is trinity, then after death you will go to him in eternal bliss.” Eiríkr said, “I would like that, to get eternal life after death.” The king said, “You will achieve this wish if you believe in everlasting God in trinity and then take holy baptism, and you will then be brought to life in his body and blood and become a friend of God. Accept Christ and praise him well in all things.”²⁵

Eiríkr did not only take theological lessons from the Roman emperor, he also asked him

about the characteristics of the nations of the world, about seas and distant lands and all about the eastern and southern parts of the world, about mighty kings and various islands, about deserts and about those places they had to cross, about strange and wondrous peoples, and how they dressed, and the customs of many nations, about vipers and winged dragons and all sorts of animals and birds, about great hoards of gold and jewels. The king answered these enquiries and many others well and wisely. After this, they were baptised, Eiríkr and his men.²⁶

This lengthy explanation of the Christian worldview, of which only an abbreviated version is provided here, can be traced to various European sources, such as the pedagogic works *Elucidarius* and *Imago mundi*, composed by the twelfth-century cleric Honorius Augustodunensis.²⁷ It reflects the Western, Latin tradition which informed the medieval worldview of Scandinavians. The idiosyncratic features of the narrative in *Eiríks saga víðförla* consist of the role of the Roman emperor as the authoritative teacher of this worldview. There can be no clearer example of the respect accorded to his position as the greatest and most holy lord in Christendom.

NOTES

1. *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* II, p. 457.
2. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIV, p. 95.
3. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIV, pp. 97–98.
4. *Stjórn*, p. 83.
5. *Hauksbók*, p. 177; *Alfræði íslenzk I*, pp. 25–26.
6. *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* I, p. 1034.
7. See Stender-Petersen, “Études Varègues V.2”, p. 128; Stender-Petersen, *Varangica*, p. 233.
8. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 158–159.
9. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIII, pp. 88, 109. In *Heimskringla* (*Íslenzk fornrit* XXIII, p. 85), he is called “Mónomákús”.
10. See Stefán Karlsson, “Alfræði Sturlu Þórðarsonar”, pp. 40–41; Sverrir Jakobsson, “Codex Reseniani”, p. 216.
11. *Íslenzk fornrit* I, pp. 32–33.
12. *Veraldar saga*, pp. 69–70.
13. The idea of *translatio imperii* in *Veraldarsaga* might stem from a Latin source, Siebert of Gembloux, but the author of *Veraldarsaga* is less adamant in blaming the Romans for this than other Western authors, see Scheel, “Byzantium-Rome-Denmark-Iceland”, pp. 262–265.
14. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIII, p. 93.

15. Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum. Danmarkshistorien* II, pp. 10, 12.
16. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum* I, pp. 479–481.
17. *Íslenszk fornrit* XXIII, pp. 108–114.
18. *Flateyjarbók* III, pp. 376–377.
19. *Íslenszk fornrit* XIV, pp. 286–298.
20. Jensen, “Indledning”, pp. xii–xiv.
21. *Eiríks saga víðförla*, p. 4.
22. *Eiríks saga víðförla*, pp. 8–15.
23. *Eiríks saga víðförla*, pp. 54–58.
24. *Eiríks saga víðförla*, pp. 16–18.
25. *Eiríks saga víðförla*, pp. 32–36.
26. *Eiríks saga víðförla*, pp. 50–54.
27. Jensen, “Indledning”, pp. xxviii–xli.



Orthodoxy

THE SCHISM THAT NEVER WAS

According to the grand narrative about “the Great Schism” of 1054, at that time Christianity split into a western branch, which subscribed to Roman Catholic Christianity, and an eastern branch, which became the Greek Orthodox Church. Furthermore, at the time of the crusades and later, various scholars in Western Europe held hostile attitudes towards the Roman Empire and the Greeks, and some went so far as to say that Constantinople had “no part in Christianity except in name”.¹ Such is the story told from a point of view that regards the attitudes of the Papacy as representative of the whole of Latin Christendom.

There are extremely few traces of this attitude to be found in Old Norse medieval sources, and what traces there are do not imply any genuine knowledge of a schism within Christianity. The best-known example is in the Icelandic law-code *Grágás*, which contains the traditional laws of the Icelanders as memorized by a lawspeaker in earlier days but codified in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In one clause a distinction is made between priests who know Latin and bishops or priests who “are not learned in the Latin tongue”, naming people from Armenia and Greece in particular.² This has been interpreted as a clear endorsement of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. However, it is not clear if this provision was adopted on the initiative of Icelanders, or if it reflects their awareness of a great schism. The notion of the unique status of Latin is not

in itself evidence of religious dissent or opposition to those who did not speak Latin. It is, first and foremost, suggestive of efforts to impose order in the Icelandic church by making Latin the only accepted language for priests.

This provision has often been linked to reports in the Old Norse historical works *Íslendingabók* and *Hungrvaka* of people “who claimed to be bishops” and of foreign bishops who offered “more leniency than Bishop Ísleifr” (Gizurarson, r. 1056–1080), but information about these clerics is vague.³ *Íslendingabók* mentions three bishops who appear to be Armenians (ON. *ermskir*), Petrus, Stephanus, and Abraham, but no further context is provided as to the context of their mission in Iceland.⁴ The Armenian Church was non-Chalcedonian and therefore in opposition to both the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church, but there is hardly anything to be found in Old Norse sources which indicates that Icelanders would have been aware of the difference between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian denominations within Christianity. These Armenians could hardly have been sent by the Roman emperor or connected to the Greek Orthodox Church. In such was the case, their Armenian origin would not have rated any mention. The presence of Greek (ON. *girskir*) clergy is less surprising, as such clerics might have accompanied King Haraldr to Norway in the 1040s. In any case, their presence in Iceland would have been opposed by the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen on hierarchical grounds, rather than for denominational reasons. In any case, their presence in Iceland was resented by the Archbishop and people were forbidden from receiving any service from them.⁵

The church in Scandinavia in the eleventh century was still a missionary field where many might call themselves bishops. One may infer from the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium*, written by Adam of Bremen in the 1070s, that Ísleifr had been appointed bishop by the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen and could be regarded as his representative in Iceland. Bishops who had been ordained elsewhere were not regarded as having the same authority as Ísleifr, who was a precursor to later bishops at the See of Skálholt.⁶ In this context there is no reason to assume that these bishops were also considered heretical. Nor is it certain that the superiors of the first Icelandic bishops would have objected to acephalic bishops on account of disagreement in religious matters or differing customs. For example, in the early years of Nordic Christianity in the eleventh century, Adam of Bremen describes with great interest various Greek church

customs which the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen had adopted.⁷ He also has nothing to say about the Great Schism, even though his work was composed after 1054. The church of Hamburg-Bremen generally supported the German emperor against the pope during the investiture conflict and would have hardly cared much about any schism between the papacy and the Roman Empire in Constantinople.

This ignorance of any schism between the different churches of Christianity continued throughout the medieval period as far as Old Norse sources are concerned. During the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries there is only one clear and unambiguous case of “the Great Schism” making an appearance in medieval Icelandic sources. Its impact appears not to have been felt in Iceland before 1274, when several annals recount that the Greeks had turned from some kind of heresy. For example, *Árna saga biskups* states: “In the same year [1274] came tidings from the aforementioned assembly in Lyon that the Greeks had reverted to true Christianity, from the contentious position that they had temporarily adopted, on the wise counsel of Pope Gregory”.⁸ This wording scarcely suggests much knowledge about the disagreement. The prolonged fracture of the church is not mentioned, and, in contrast, it is implied that the dispute, supposedly resolved in Lyon, was only of temporary nature.

The prevailing attitude to the conflict between “the Latins and the Greeks” seems rather to be closer to that which is found in a short comic tale, “On the wise man and the fool” (ON. *Afspekingi ok dára*), which is a part of a collection of edifying adventures, written in Iceland sometime in the late fourteenth century. In that tale, the rivalry between Rome and Constantinople is personified as a man of little worth who was sent to the great city to gather from there the greatest lawbooks in Europe. The fool enters into a silent dispute with the wisest man among the Greeks, in which they each make three signs. Following the debate, the Greek philosopher interprets the conversation as one of great theological subtlety, whereas the Roman idiot interprets the gestures as simple threats. Because of the favourable impression that was made on the Greek sage, the lawbooks were then sent to Rome.⁹ Even if the tale could be interpreted as a triumph of folkish wit over a cerebral mindset, in the Old Norse translation, the tale is summed up in a positive manner toward the Greek intellectual who did not comprehend the boorish mind of his interlocutor. Thus, the refined culture of Constantinople was not considered askance in the manner of “Latin” proto-nationalism.

THE APOSTLE OF THE NORTH

Within the Old Norse grand narrative of the Christianization of the Nordic lands, no figure was held in greater esteem than the Norwegian King Ólafr Tryggvason. At least from the twelfth century on, there was a common opinion among Icelandic historians that Ólafr Tryggvason had played a significant role in the Christianization of Iceland shortly before the year 1000. Due to this decisive event, Ólafr Tryggvason was a pivotal figure in the Icelanders' retelling of their own past and of the history of Scandinavia.

Oddr Snorrason, a Benedictine monk at Þingeyri in the north of Iceland, wrote the oldest preserved saga about Ólafr, in the last quarter of the twelfth century. In the saga, Ólafr's journeys in the East before he became the king of Norway play an important formative role in his development. He had to flee from Norway to escape from his rivals and grew up in Rus (ON. *Garðaríki*) in relative obscurity until he was discovered by King Vladimir and his pious queen Allogia.¹⁰ He also went to the country of the Vends (Poland) where he served King Boleslaw and married his daughter.¹¹ Ólafr had already promised to adopt Christianity after a close call at sea, but upon his return to Rus it is claimed that he had another vision and a voice from heaven said to him: "Go to Greece and the name of the Lord will be made known to you." Thus, Ólafr travelled to Greece to learn the true name of God.¹²

In Greece he met "glorious and devout scholars and he was taught the true faith and God's commandments". Then he asked a Bishop named Páll [Paul] to "go with him to Rus and preach God's name to heathen nations". According to the monk Oddr, the land of the Rus was thus Christianized via Greece through Ólafr's intercession.¹³

Contemporary sources about Ólafr Tryggvason lend little support to this account of his adventures in the East. But the idea that Norwegian and Icelandic missionaries had played a part in the Christianization of the Rus may derive, in part, from the close connections between the courts of Rus, Norway, and Denmark before 1200 (Fig. 1). The Norwegian kings had close and friendly relations with the Rus princes in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and Danish kings were also related to the princes of the Rus. Concurrently, the Rus venerated royal-born Scandinavian saints, such as Magnús, the Earl of Orkney, Knútr of Denmark, and Ólafr of Norway.¹⁴ There does not seem to have been any significant religious discord between Rus and Scandinavia in the twelfth century.

When Oddr Snorrason wrote his *Saga of Ólafr Tryggvason* at the end of the twelfth century, relations between Nordic and Eastern powers had

Fig. 1 Triumphal arch,
Sæby ved Tissø
(kalkmalerier.dk)



been close and friendly for many years. The religious schism, or conflict, was hardly discussed, if at all. When Oddr describes the achievements of Ólafr Tryggvason in the East, his missionary accomplishments were accentuated. Oddr adhered to the view that Christianity had come to Rus from Greece, which is also found in *The Primary Chronicle* and other Slavonic sources, but the novelty of his account is that Ólafr Tryggvason is situated as an intermediary. The “Apostle of the North”, who was regarded as the driving force for the introduction of Christianity in Norway, Iceland, the Faroes, and Greenland, was thus also an “Apostle of the East.”

Oddr’s depiction of Ólafr Tryggvason’s missionary work in the East became predominant in Icelandic historical writing about Ólafr. When *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* was written in the early fourteenth century, this idea still prevailed in Iceland. At that time, however, the redactor had heard a different story concerning the Christianization of Rus, which was attached to the narrative of Ólafr:

What has now been said of the Christian preaching of Ólafr Tryggvason in Garðaríki [Rus] is not untrue, as the excellent and true book that is called *Imago mundi* tells distinctly that those peoples that are called Rusci, Polaii, Vngarij were Christianized in the days of that Otto who was the third emperor with this name. Some books relate that Emperor Otto waged war in the Austrvegr [the Eastern lands] and brought people there far and wide to Christianity, and Ólafr Tryggvason was with him.¹⁵

Evidently, there were conflicting accounts of the Christianization of the Rus in circulation, and the redactor of *Ólaf's saga hin mesta* valiantly attempts to believe them all equally. However, there is little harmony between the narrative attributed to *Imago mundi*, which emphasizes the role of the Saxon emperor and the Latins in the Christianization of Eastern Europe, and the Old Norse version, which Oddr Snorrason and his successors had implanted into the historical consciousness of the Icelanders. The redactor of *Ólaf's saga hin mesta* had no awareness of a Great Schism, which would have confused matters even further, but nevertheless felt compelled to provide the official Latin version alongside the version which was clearly preferred and given the greatest authority in *Ólaf's saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta*, that of Oddr Snorrason and his missionaries from Greece.

From the late fourteenth century, we also have *Eymundar þáttur Hringssonar* in *Flatexjarbók*, which depicts politics in Rus and power disputes between the rulers in a story that supposedly takes place in the early eleventh century.¹⁶ This tale bears witness to how Icelanders viewed both the state of affairs and the political situation in Rus in earlier times. It recounts the disputes between a prince in Novgorod and his brothers, who are rulers in Kiev and Polotsk. In *Eymundar þáttur* it is assumed that the lands of the Rus are Christianity's outpost and beyond its borders are "evil peoples" (ON. *illþýði*), such as the Turks and Vlachs.¹⁷

The grand narrative of Ólafr Tryggvason as the apostle of the north, but also as the initiator of a Christian mission in Russia, serves to accentuate the historical link between Scandinavia and Rus and their status as affiliated kingdoms. It also underscores the imagined links between Scandinavia and the Roman Empire, as Ólafr Tryggvason is depicted as the promoter of a Greek Christian mission in the Kingdom of the Rus. The narratives about Ólafr Tryggvason are therefore a clear manifestation of the ecumenical attitudes prevalent in Old Norse historiography from

the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. There was no capacity for any notion of the Great Schism between Latin and Greek Christianity.

REVERED IN THE EASTERN LANDS

From the early twelfth century, Ólafr Tryggvason was regarded as the main actor in the Christianization of Norway and the North Atlantic islands. This view was promoted in *Íslendingabók* and in many Icelandic and Norwegian historical works which followed its outline of Icelandic and Norwegian history. It may have been a particularly Icelandic point of view, derived from efforts to promote this particular king, rather than his better-known successor, Ólafr the saint, who was venerated all over Scandinavia and was well-known among the Varangians in Constantinople.¹⁸

The view of the Christianization of Iceland which is promoted in *Íslendingabók* placed an emphasis on two main groups of actors, with the first being the Norwegian king and the other being notable men from the Southern and Eastern Quarters of Iceland. There were other versions of the country's history in circulation, many of which focused on the role of people from the western part of the Northern Quarter, which was the vicinity of the monastery of Þingeyrar, founded in 1133. This focus is, for instance, apparent in the stories of Iceland's Christianization. In the early thirteenth-century *Kristni saga*, the role of missionaries from this region, who are not mentioned in *Íslendingabók*, is emphasized, and these missionaries are depicted as important predecessors to the individuals given credit for Christianization in *Íslendingabók*.¹⁹

Apart from the name of one missionary-bishop, these missionaries are not referred to in any earlier works, including *Íslendingabók*. Among the missionaries was a man called Þorvaldr the Far-traveller (ON. *viðförli*) who came from a farm called Giljá, located in the vicinity of the monastery at Þingeyrar. *Kristni saga* tells that he travelled widely in the south of Europe and that he discovered a bishop named Friðrekr (Ger. Friedrich) there who came with him to Iceland to baptize his kinsmen. Friðrekr is listed among the missionary bishops in *Íslendingabók*, but Þorvaldr is not mentioned there, nor is anything more said about their efforts.²⁰ *Kristni saga* describes how Þorvaldr and Friðrekr had some success in the Northern Quarter, but less so in the Western Quarter. Following that, they went to the general assembly (*alþingi*) where they encountered some opposition. Finally, they left Iceland after Þorvaldr had killed some of his opponents and the bishop went back to Saxony where he died "and is a true saint",

according to *Kristnisaga*. Þorvaldr, however, returned to his occupation as a merchant.²¹

At the end of *Kristni saga*, it states that Þorvaldr and another missionary, Stefnir Þorgilsson, met each other after the death of King Ólafr Tryggvason and travelled together to Palestine, then to Constantinople, and finally to Kiev. It is stated that Þorvaldr died in Rus, close to the city of Polotsk, and is buried on a mountain there at the Church of Saint John the Baptist, “and they call him a saint”. Stefnir then returned to Denmark where he was killed. The source for at least some of this information is said to be “Ari the Old”, who must be the author of *Íslendingabók*, although this is not mentioned in any of his preserved writings.²²

Þorvaldr thus travelled to the southern lands, and then back north along the Eastern Road. No mention is made of Þorvaldr’s business in the East, but it is inferred that he and the other Icelandic missionary were travelling as pilgrims visiting notable holy places. Thus, in *Kristni saga*, a strong connection is made between the Christianization of Iceland and the lands in the East, a connection that was already present in the person of the Norwegian King Ólafr Tryggvason.

In the fourteenth-century *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta*, more is said about the life of Þorvaldr after the end of his missionary activities in Iceland. It is stated that he never went back to Iceland but travelled to Jerusalem to seek the holy places there and “he travelled all around Greece and to Constantinople, and the emperor [ON. *stólkonungrinn*] himself received him with great honour and granted him many excellent gifts of friendship”. This was not the end of his exaltation, as it is then related in the saga that Þorvaldr was

honoured as glorious confessor of our Lord Jesus Christ, by the Emperor of Constantinople and all his magnates and not least by all the bishops and abbots throughout Greece and Syria. Above all else, he was revered in the Eastern lands where he was sent by the Emperor [ON. *keisaranum*] as a chief or ruler, appointed above all the kings of Russia and in all of Garðaríki.²³

It is noteworthy that Þorvaldr seems to have received secular power in recognition of his status as a confessor of the Lord, but nothing more is said about his secular career, whereas it is noted that he built and endowed a monastery dedicated to John the Baptist and that he was buried there when he died.

The later career of Þorvaldr as the ruler of all the kings of the Rus is an elaborate fantasy, but it is also noteworthy that such a man who was reckoned to be among the most noteworthy missionaries of Iceland was believed to have reached such an exalted worldly status in the East. The relationship to the legends of Ólafr Tryggvason as the Apostle of the Rus is evident, but the differences are also conspicuous. Ólafr was made responsible for the Christianization of the Rus after having served the King of the Rus as a warrior. His missionaries came from the Roman Empire, rather than from Scandinavia or Saxony. In contrast, Þorvaldr became a secular governor over all the kings of the Rus and a representative of the Roman Emperor. He is not explicitly connected to any mission except in Iceland, although it is implied that his career as a missionary put him on good standing with the Roman Emperor. Whereas, according to the sagas, Ólafr spent his youth among the Rus, Þorvaldr was only sent there when he was mature in years.

There are also some commonalities between the two as well. Both narratives emphasize close connections between Scandinavia and the lands of the Rus in the ancient past. Ólafr Tryggvason and Þorvaldr víðförli are both the most exalted among the Scandinavians that lived among the Rus. Another common feature is that the Scandinavians's important role in the kingdoms of the Rus was harmonious with the religious connection between the Roman Empire and the Rus. In fact, persons like Ólafr and Þorvaldr were portrayed as pioneers in the strengthening of this connection.

ROYAL RESURRECTION

In the earliest historical narrative dealing with Ólafr Tryggvason, the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium* by Adam of Bremen, it is stated that Ólafr was killed in a sea battle at the Sound (ON. *Eyrarsund*) between Denmark and Sweden. In *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, however, the battle is set at the island of Svoldr, near the coast of Poland.²⁴ It is also claimed that he escaped, “which some people find incredible”, and boarded a ship of “the Vends” (i.e. from Poland) and that he was nursed back to health there. Oddr himself claims that he believes that Ólafr went to Greece, the Holy Land, and Syria and spent the rest of his life in repentance for his youthful life as a warrior. In one manuscript of the saga, the scribe makes a further point that Ólafr's armour was hanging at the doors of a church in Jerusalem, that many had seen his spear, and that his helmet had been

identified in Antioch, “and who would have brought these things into such far-away regions”.²⁵

The unlikely survival of Ólafr Tryggvason served several purposes. One was evidently to connect the missionary of the north to the significant places of Christian history that had gained contemporary relevance in the age of the crusades. “Greece” (i.e. The Roman Empire) is mentioned at the outset, referencing how Ólafr had brought missionaries from there in order to Christianize the Rus. A second objective was that Ólafr had not died as a martyr fighting for the cause of Christianity but was slain in internecine squabbles with other Scandinavian kings. His death was heroic rather than saintly. His afterlife-presence in the great centres of Christianity thus served the purpose of letting the Viking hero translate into a Christian hero, like one of the holy men revered in the early centuries of Christianity. Unlike many heroes from the sagas of the Icelanders, who served in the Varangian Guard later in life, Ólafr did not become a Christian knight. This exemplifies a separate fate for the missionary from that of the warrior, a dichotomy only transcended by Þorvaldr víðförli.

There are other examples of an afterlife in the East to be found in the saga corpus. In the Old Norse *Játvardar saga*, a history of the Anglo-Saxon king Edward the Confessor (r. 1042–1066), found in the manuscript *Flateyjarbók* from the 1380s, there is a story about a large group of Anglo-Saxons, led by Earl Siward, who went to Constantinople some years after the fall of Harold Godwinsson in 1066 and fought alongside King Kirjalax (Alexios I). This has parallels in earlier Latin accounts, such as *Chronicon Laudunense* from the early thirteenth century, and the fourteenth-century author was likely familiar with some such source. There are also novelties in the Icelandic version, in particular that the Anglo-Saxons were granted land in the north-eastern part of the empire, a six-day’s sailing across the Black Sea, which they called England, with cities called “London and York and the names of other major cities in England”.²⁶ Thus, the lost Anglo-Saxon kingdom lived on at the outskirts of the Roman Empire.

In this unusual narrative a religious schism emerges when the Anglo-Saxon settlers refuse to use *Pálsbók* (The Book of Paul) “then current in Constantinople; instead they sought bishops and other clerics from Hungary”.²⁷ The mention of a “Book of Paul” could be interpreted as a reference to a heretical sect, such as the Paulicians, but such heresies were hardly common in Constantinople in the late eleventh century. It is much more likely an allusion to the Bishop Paul, mentioned in *Ólaf’s saga*

Tryggvasonar, the missionary who Christianized the Rus some decades before. The idea of a difference in religion between the Anglo-Saxons and the Romans is probably derived from the source also used by *Chronicon Laudunense*. However, there was no Old Norse term for such differences, so instead a reference was made to the imaginary missionary of the Rus, already known from *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*.

The idea that the East was a safe haven for those who lost in the political power battles of the remote northwest illustrates that belief in the unity of Christendom was the dominant discourse in medieval Iceland, where such narratives were composed throughout the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. In contrast, references to a religious divide, sometimes translated from Latin sources, are few and vaguely formulated.

No doubt the Great Schism in the Middle Ages had some indirect effect on the Icelandic church. However, there is little that points to Icelanders having had a clear knowledge about it. So rarely do reports of the split of Roman and Greek Catholicism find their way into Icelandic annals that an understanding of the nature of the dispute seems to have been limited and no awareness of a prolonged religious dispute is evident. Accounts of clashes between Greeks and Latins occasionally can be found, but seldom about the root of the issue, and there is nothing to indicate that the Icelanders writing about it saw it a deeply rooted issue.

In the *Saga of Ólafr Tryggvason* and in the accounts of the missionary king which followed, medieval Icelandic historians look upon the Christianization of Rus and West Nordic countries as part of a series of events which showed Ólafr Tryggvason at work everywhere. This was beside the fact that they were aware that Christianity had been introduced in Rus via Greece. Throughout Icelandic sources one finds constant and fairly equivocal reverence for the Roman emperor, who was looked upon as one of the foremost rulers of Christianity. It is perhaps not surprising that this sentiment was prominent in the twelfth century when the manner in which Nordic kings and nobles were received in Constantinople really did seem to have been of the utmost significance to them. At the far end of the north, however, this perception seems to have persisted into the fourteenth century. In Icelandic works dating from the late fourteenth century, the emperor in Constantinople is still viewed as a Christian authority who could grant pious men a great deal of power in the East.

NOTES

1. See Bartlett, “Patterns of University of Diversity”, p. 37.
2. *Grágás*, p. 19.
3. *Íslenzk fornrit* I, p. 18, *Íslenzk fornrit* XVI, pp. 8–9.
4. *Íslenzk fornrit* I, p. 18.
5. *Íslenzk fornrit* XVI, p. 9.
6. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, p. 486.
7. *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, p. 366.
8. *Íslenzk fornrit* XVII. p. 49, see also *Islandske Annaler*, pp. 139, 194, 259, 332, 484.
9. *Ævintýri frá miðöldum* II, pp. 357–362.
10. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXV, pp. 143–145, 147, 150–153.
11. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXV, pp. 154–160.
12. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXV, pp. 163–164.
13. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXV, pp. 164–166, see Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 676–682.
14. See Lind, “De russiske ægteskaber”; Lind, “The Martyria of Odense and a Twelfth Century Russian Prayer”.
15. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* I, p. 158.
16. *Flateyjarbók* II, pp. 118–134.
17. *Flateyjarbók* II, p. 126.
18. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 197–199.
19. See Sverrir Jakobsson, “Conversion and Cultural Memory”, pp. 15–21.
20. *Íslenzk fornrit* I, p. 18.
21. *Íslenzk fornrit* XV, pp. 3–13.
22. *Íslenzk fornrit* XV, pp. 37–38.
23. *Íslenzk fornrit* XV, pp. 88–89.
24. See *Íslenzk fornrit* XXV, p. 306.
25. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXV, pp. 356–358, 361.
26. *Flateyjarbók* III, pp. 470–472.
27. *Flateyjarbók* III, p. 472.



Afterlives

A LOST CONNECTION

With the capture of Constantinople in 1204 by Latin armies, the history of the Roman Empire entered a new period. The crusaders established an unstable Latin state in and around Constantinople, while the remaining empire splintered into a number of Hellenic successor states, notably Nicaea, Epiros, and Trebizond. They fought as allies against the Latin establishments, but also fought among themselves for supremacy. The Nicaean Empire proved to be the most successful of these successor states, and its armies eventually reconquered Constantinople from the Latins in 1261, reestablishing the traditional Roman Empire under the Palaiologos dynasty.

For a brief moment, the Roman Empire seemed set to return to its former glory. However, there was to be little peace for the much-weakened empire in the early fourteenth century as it fended off successive attacks by the Latins, the Serbians, the Bulgarians, and, most importantly, the Ottoman Turks. The Black Plague between 1346 and 1349 killed almost half of the inhabitants of Constantinople, at a time when civil strife was tearing the empire apart. In 1354 the Turks captured Gallipoli and in 1365 they established themselves at Adrianople in Thrace. The decline of the Roman Empire seemed to have become irreversible.

The Varangian Guard survived the capture of Constantinople; there are mentions of Varangians in the service of the Roman emperor in Nicaea

and they were definitely in the service of the Latin emperor in Constantinople.¹ After the re-conquest of Constantinople in 1261, there are occasional mentions of the Varangians up until 1405.² In 1329, there were still “Varangians with their axes” guarding the keys to any city in which the emperor happened to be staying.³

In the late medieval Roman Empire, the name “Varangian” was often affixed to Greek surnames, indicating a person of Scandinavian origin in such names as Βάραγγος, Βαραγγόπουλος, or Βαραγκάτες (Varangos, Varangopoulos, Varangkates). The evidence of such names testify to the integration of the descendants of peoples of English and Nordic origin into Roman society. These “Hellenized” Varangians obtained land and estates both in Constantinople and in northern Greece, on the Aegean Islands, in Asia Minor, and practically all over the empire. The descriptions of Scandinavia and Baltic region in the texts of Palaiologan epoch are also essentially different from that of earlier times and seem to be based on travel accounts. The historian Laonikos Chalkokondyles makes a note of trade contacts between Livonia and Denmark, Germany, Britain, and the “Celts”.⁴

Of particular note is a brief account in Greek of a voyage made through Scandinavia and the Baltic lands, written by an individual named Laskaris Kananos. The author describes how he visited Bergen, Stockholm, Riga, Danzig, Lübeck, and Copenhagen before moving on to England and to Iceland. His account is clearly the result of first-hand observation, rather than classical mimesis, and it includes a number of verifiable details such as distances, climate, and the diet of locals. It is the only ancient or medieval Greek text that claims to be an eyewitness report on Scandinavia and the Baltic region, and it is the first Greek text to mention such cities as Copenhagen, Stockholm, Bergen, and Riga.

Kananos probably made his journey in 1438–1439 and his travelogue has notes on coinage in Stockholm and Bergen, the subordination of Sweden and Norway to the Danish king, and the residence of the king of Denmark in “Kupanava” (Copenhagen). When he speaks of Iceland, his choice of first-person verbs indicates that he himself had crossed the sea from England to Iceland. Kananos identified Iceland as ancient Thule and calls the inhabitants “ichthyophags”, fish-eaters. He claims that in Iceland the whole year is divided into one day and one night, each of them lasting for six months, which likely indicates that he visited the country during high summer. Furthermore, he notes that Icelandic men are “sturdy and strong” and that they drink water rather than wine.⁵

In Scandinavia the late medieval political development of the Roman Empire gained very little attention. Scandinavian pilgrims in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries seem to have no longer paid a visit to Constantinople en route.⁶ In the *Icelandic Annals*, tidings from the Roman Empire are infrequent and often less than informative. It is mentioned in several Icelandic annals in 1215 that a patriarch from Constantinople was present at the Fourth Lateran Council, but not that this was due to the creation of a Latin Patriarchate in Constantinople following the Fourth Crusade. As mentioned before, the Council of Lyon is mentioned in several Icelandic annals but in only one of them, the fourteenth-century *Gottskálksannáll*, is there a reference to the emperors Michael and Andronikos (called “Androvicus” in the annal).⁷ The split of the Roman Empire in many small kingdoms in the thirteenth century is rarely referenced to in Old Norse sources. The Roman state seemed to have disappeared from the minds of Nordic literates.

At the same time, however, there are frequent references to the Roman emperor in many kinds of literature, for instance in the most popular Old Norse genre of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the romances (*riddarasögur*). There, the Roman emperor was a stock figure. But which Roman emperor, the one of the past or the one who still existed, albeit in a new geopolitical situation, the complex contemporary system of states which replaced the high medieval order?

THE MIGHTIEST MAN IN THE WHOLE WORLD

The Roman Emperor, in his various guises as the King of Greece (Grikklandskonungr), King of Constantinople (Garðskonungr) or as the stólkonungr, appears in many Old Norse romances. The romances were originally prose adaptations of the French literary *chansons de geste*, but the genre quickly evolved with the advent of indigenous romances. There are important differences, both in structure and ideology, between the Old Norse romances and the chansons de geste. The continental texts are characterized by a certain ambivalence in their depiction of the Roman Empire. In contrast with an admiration of the wealth and splendour of the empire, there appears a contempt for “Greek” perfidy and effeminacy. Such models existed in the north, as these so-called riddarasögur were translated from French romances at the court of King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway from about 1226 onwards.

One example is *Karlamagnús saga*, a collection of Old Norse translations from the *Cycle du roi* and *Pseudo-Turpin's Chronicle* from the thirteenth century. The translation of the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, originally from the middle of the twelfth century, especially illustrates this typical Western, competitive view of the Roman emperors. The incentive for Charlemagne's armed pilgrimage was a statement by his wife that Emperor Hugon of Constantinople was kinglier than the mighty Charles himself.⁸ After visiting Outremer, the returning pilgrims are received splendidly in Constantinople in the king's hall with its many wonderful features. King Hugon orders the Franks' conversations to be eavesdropped, and, according to their custom, they boast about the feats that they think they can accomplish in the Roman Empire. In his wrath, Hugon forces the Franks either to carry out these feats, or to die.⁹ With God's help, however, the Franks manage to carry out some of their boasts, leaving Hugon in shock and awe. In the end, Hugon accepts Charlemagne as his lord.¹⁰ Thus, Frankish superiority is demonstrated with the help of God, Charlemagne is the kingliest ruler on earth, and the queen's statement from the beginning of the story is rendered mute. Interconnections between these texts and crusader chronicles like the *Gesta Dei per Francos*—and thus between collective memory from the crusades and courtly literature—are undeniable.

Here the sagas differ. In the numerous Old Norse bridal quests, the rulers of the Roman Empire are viewed as friends, even if the narrative pattern is very similar to that of the translations from continental romances. In *Bering's saga* from the early fourteenth century, an exiled prince from Holstein meets and befriends Emanuel, the Emperor of the Greeks, at the French court in Paris. Beringr follows Emanuel to Constantinople and wards off an attack by heathen enemies. He is then offered the hand of Emanuel's daughter in marriage, but instead decides to reconquer his father's lands in Saxonia, Holstein, and Frisia. Beringr prevails with help from the Romans and is able to establish peace with the Western Emperor, whom he later succeeds.¹¹ In *Bering's saga*, the turning point of the fortune of the protagonist is his meeting with Emanuel. He is the one who supported the young prince in his aspirations, while the Westerner plays the part of the suspicious, dangerous host.¹²

In *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, one of the earliest indigenous romances, the son of the Saxon emperor, when asked whither to sail, expresses a wish to seek his fortune with the "mightiest man in the whole world, the emperor (ON. stólkonungr) himself, and let us sail to Constantinople".¹³

At the end of the narrative, after various tribulations, Konráð marries the Emperor's daughter, Mattildr (Mathilda), and inherits the crown of the Roman Empire.¹⁴

Two points can be made concerning the historical context of this narrative. While it occurs in an imaginary, adventurous past, the names of the protagonists derive from historical persons from the twelfth century, such as the Saxon Emperor Conrad (r. 1139–1152) and the well-known Roman Emperor Alexios I. Another important detail is that the son of the Emperor of Saxony clearly regarded the Roman emperor in Constantinople as being superior to himself and his father.

As with most romances, *Konráðs saga* takes place in an imaginary past and, in this case, that past was reminiscent of the twelfth century when the Roman emperor in Constantinople was held in high esteem by Nordic monarchs, as well as by many other Scandinavians seeking their fortune in one of the holiest sites of Christendom. The vicissitudes of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century international politics do not seem to have had any influence on that esteem.¹⁵ There was still a hierarchy of monarchs in which emperors are considered superior to kings and the son of the Saxon emperor is exalted through association with the stólkonungr.

Another romance, *Kirjalax saga*, composed in the early fourteenth century, takes place in an even remoter past, the time of King Arthur. However, the international situation that it depicts has resonances with thirteenth century politics. The eastern Mediterranean is divided between many kings, among whom is Laicus, the King of Athens and Thessaly and father of the eponymous protagonist. There are emperors in Sicily, the namesakes of the fifth-century emperors Leo and Zeno, but the greatest monarch of all is the ruler of Constantinople, the “stólkonungr”. He is called by the Latin name Lotharius. In the end, Kirjalax marries Lotharius' daughter and inherits his kingdom, but Kirjalax is also made “the high king of all Greece and the seven kingdoms that follow with it” by the Sicilian emperor.¹⁶

Although it is set in a remote past, *Kirjalax saga* also refers to the political situation in the early thirteenth century when there was a Latin emperor in Constantinople and Frederick II, King of Sicily, was also the Holy Roman Emperor of Germany. However, the protagonist's name refers to three twelfth-century Roman emperors in Constantinople, of whom Alexios I was the most celebrated in Old Norse works. The chief enemy of these Christian lords is the King Sultan of Greater Babylon, as the Muslim Lord of Cairo was generally known in romance literature.

In *Kirjalax saga*, which is replete with scholarly learning of various nature, the past becomes a jumble. The Emperor of Sicily has a Greek name, but the monarch in Constantinople has a Latin name, and the political scene refers in equal parts to the fifth, sixth, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. The one implacable fact to come from this mishmash is the position of the stólkonungr, who is considered the greatest lord of Christendom, a position that Kirjalax himself eventually acquires.

The Old Norse romances preserved a world view which hearkened to the age of the early Scandinavian armed pilgrimages. The emperor was safely ensconced on his throne in Constantinople and widely admired as the greatest monarch in Christendom. Later developments, such as the division of the empire during the Nicaean and Palaiologan periods, had very little impact on this literature. It was as if the events of 1204 had never happened.

THE LADY AND THE VARANGIAN

As previously related, in *Morkinskinna*, King Haraldr, having slain a ferocious dragon, manages to escape from the dungeon into which he was thrown by the emperor through the aid of an ailing widow. The widow is motivated by simple piety: she had received a vision of the holy Ólafr, King Haraldr's martyred brother, who exhorted her to aid his brother's escape.¹⁷

In *Grettis saga*, an Icelandic saga composed around 1400, this noble lady makes a reappearance, along with various other characters from earlier Varangian tales. The first is the avenger who travels to Constantinople to seek vengeance for a relative killed in Iceland. Second, there is a man thrown into a dungeon but saved through a timely intervention. Third, there is even a motif from *The Tale of Tristan and Isolde*, where a woman and her lover stage an elaborate scene in order to allow her to fulfill a sworn oath, while deceiving her audience at the same time. And finally, there is the motif of the virtuous hermit who atones for previous sins in a cave. By combining all of these motifs, *Grettis saga* became a classical tale of a Varangian, retold for subsequent generations.

The main protagonist of the Varangian episode in *Grettis saga* is the older brother of Grettir, Þorsteinn drómundr. His connection with the Roman Empire is apparent in his nickname, which alludes to the type of a Roman galley (Gr. δρόμων) prevalent in the imperial army before 1204, at which time the dromons were replaced by Italian-style galleys.¹⁸ This episode comes at the end of the saga when, in the wake of the killing of

Grettir, his slayer, Þorbjörn Öngull, travels to Constantinople and enters into service there.

As is told in the episode, Þorsteinn followed his brother's killer there, where they both joined the Varangian Guard. The saga states that this had occurred during the reign of "Mikael katalak", an emperor already mentioned in *Morkinskinna* as the ruler of the empire at the time that King Haraldr Sigurðarson of Norway was in Constantinople.¹⁹ The Varangians held "a meeting with weapons" (ON. *vápnafing*) where they each showed their cache of arms. Þorbjörn had come there with the sword that had been used to slay Grettir, which showed a crack in it, and bragged about its previous history. The sword was then passed around and when it came to Þorsteinn, he wielded it and killed Þorbjörn. He was then placed in a dungeon by the authorities of the city, but the emperor plays no part in the action of this episode.²⁰

In the dungeon, Þorsteinn awaited his fate, but passed his time with singing, as he had a powerful and harmonious voice. A noble lady called by the Latin name Spes heard the singing and paid a ransom for his release. He then lived with her but rejoined the Varangians and went on expeditions with them. It is said that he acquitted himself well and that he became a friend of Haraldr Sigurðarson, who advised him in his following predicament. A tale of intrigue evolves around Þorsteinn and Spes, as they become lovers and have to resort to various machinations to fool her husband. Spes was married to a man named Sigurðr, but the marriage was due to his wealth and there was little love in it on her part. In the end she swears an oath to prove her innocence and resorts to a ruse with Þorsteinn in order to appear blameless without resorting to falsehoods. It is implied that King Haraldr played a part in this artifice. Spes then divorces her husband, manages to gain most of their wealth, and Sigurðr is banished from the country.²¹ Þorsteinn then marries Spes and they spend two years in Constantinople, but then travel to Norway where they have children and Þorsteinn becomes a retainer of King Magnús.

When Haraldr Sigurðarson returns to Norway, Þorsteinn has become an old man of 67 years, according to the saga, and does not enter into his service. Instead, Þorsteinn and Spes sell their property and travel to Rome, where they seek penance. Following their absolution at the hand of the pope, they separate and have two caves made for them, where each lives as a recluse. Thus, they end their life in peace with God, having previously shared a happy matrimonial life.²²

As already mentioned, there is very little original about this episode in *Grettis saga*. It is an amalgamation of earlier Varangian tales intertwined with a romantic narrative. This was, in fact, what helped the episode become an enduring classic, as it contained all the elements of the Varangian legend within a single narrative. At the time when it was composed, the Varangians had become a part of a remote past, characters in a romantic plot that held no connection to any present reality.

THE END OF THE LINE

Medieval stereotypes of the Varangians became embedded in the cultural memory of later ages, generally through retrospection and re-telling of the major sources, *The Primary Chronicle* and the Old Norse sagas. Following the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, the age of the Varangians became part of a distant past, of little relevance to a new age with new challenges. Later, at the advent of the Enlightenment, the decline of the Ottoman State, and the independence of Greece, this area of history began to gain a new relevance.

In the late eighteenth century, the Varangians were celebrated as founders of the later Russian state. Empress Catherine the Great (r. 1762–1796) composed two plays dedicated to the Varangian rulers Riurik and Oleg. They were celebrated as just and efficient foreign rulers, much like Catherine envisioned herself. Oleg's reputed attack on Constantinople in 907 received particular attention as the integration of Russian culture within Greece.²³ The Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) devoted a series of poems to the “bellicose Varangian” Prince Oleg, with celebratory nods to his attack on Constantinople, which the poet contrasted with the less successful Russian ventures of his own time.²⁴ Pushkin was interested in the irony of Oleg's death by his own horse, a prophecy which he sought to forestall without success.

With the emergence of nationalist literature in the nineteenth century, the Varangians were cast in new roles as national forebears in various countries. In the novel *Count Robert of Paris*, Walter Scott (1771–1832) introduces an Anglo-Saxon Varangian, Hereward, who served the Roman emperor during the time of the First Crusade. At the end of the story, Hereward is able to return to England, his original home. Influenced by the writings of the historian Edward Gibbon, Scott had “resolved on a complex picture of contrast between the degenerate Roman society of the East and the ascending, rather barbarian, but robust society of the Franks

of Western Europe”.²⁵ Within this dichotomy, the Varangian Hereward was classified as a Westerner due to his Anglo-Saxon background.

The Icelandic poet Grímur Thomsen (1820–1896) composed a poem about Halldór Snorrason, the Icelandic companion of King Haraldr Sigurðarson, celebrating his laconic spirit and stoic apathy in the face of his many tribulations. The main focus is on Halldór’s departure from King Haraldr’s court, when he forces the king to pay him wages that were owed to him. It celebrates the independent spirit of Halldór and his refusal to be the king’s slave. The poet regards him as representative of medieval Icelanders in general, as they wanted to be friends to the Norwegian king, but not his servants.²⁶ In Grímur’s poetry, the Varangian is a noble prototype, a proud companion of kings, rather than a fawning servant.

In this nationalistic context, the Varangian became an ideal personification of ethnic values and prowess. The links between the Varangian homelands and the Roman Empire become secondary to such nationalistic discourse. Thus, the image of the Varangian became subsumed into a larger discourse on ethnicity in the twentieth century, with the Scandinavian nations increasingly adopting the image of the Vikings in a positive context, whereas the Varangians became secondary actors in discourses on the creation of the Russian state, with Russian and Soviet scholars usually emphasizing local factors and traditions.

In twentieth-century popular culture, the Varangians generally appear as Western outsiders who serve as familiar witnesses to the exotic “Byzantine” culture, in the tradition of Walter Scott. *The Last Viking* trilogy from 1980, created by Poul and Karen Anderson, follows the career of King Haraldr Sigurðarson of Norway, with the first volume devoted to his exploits in the East. The storyline generally follows that of *Morkinskinna*, enhanced with historical information on the politics of Kievan Rus and the Roman Empire, but the ambiguous character of Haraldr, as portrayed in *Morkinskinna*, becomes more genuinely heroic in this modern version. Another historical novel which is focussed on the time Haraldr spent in the Roman Empire is *Byzantium* by Michael Ennis from 1989. Haraldr again plays the part of the outsider, a witness to the “Byzantine” intricacies of politics in Constantinople. In modern times, Haraldr, as he is depicted in the thirteenth-century Old Norse tradition, is the emblematic Varangian.

The Varangians, as a collective group, could serve as an emblem of an exotic past, but also as people worthy of emulation. In a poem from 1914 titled “Væringjar” (Varangians), the Icelandic poet Einar Benediktsson

(1864–1940) heralds the coming of a new age, with progress led by “vikings of the spirit”.²⁷ The warriors of the past were a model in a certain manner, but what was to be emulated was not their military prowess, but rather their will for power and longing for travel.

That the Varangians continued to serve as an emblem in cultural discourse can be seen in the 1978 Icelandic edition of a picture book retelling the plot of the immensely popular science fiction movie *Star Wars* (Ic. *Stjörnustríð*). The Icelandic translator clearly thought that the cultural references to Japanese bushi warriors and Zen Buddhism would be opaque to Icelandic readers and instead made several references to *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for instance in translating the names of major characters. One such adaptation is the translation of the sci-fi term “jedi knight” with the word “væringi” (Varangian).²⁸ Consequently, for an Icelandic audience, Luke Skywalker turned out to be a Varangian, just like his father before him.

The legend of the Varangians has thus proved adaptable to new times and new circumstances. However, it has undergone some changes along the way. In modern times, the individual heroism of the Varangian seems to have overshadowed the nobility of his service to the greatest empire of Christendom. In a sense, the Varangians have become knights without a mission; embodiments of a noble, but ultimately useless, valour.

NOTES

1. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, p. 258.
2. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 273–287.
3. *Ioannis Cantacuzeni historiarum* I, p. 389.
4. Bibikov, “Byzantine sources for the history of Balticum and Scandinavia,” pp. 22–24; see also Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, p. 278.
5. Blomqvist, “The Geography of the Baltic in Greek Eyes”, pp. 45–47.
6. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, p. 289.
7. See *Íslandske Annaler*, p. 332.
8. *Karlamagnús saga: Branches I, III, VII et IX*, pp. 236–237.
9. *Karlamagnús saga: Branches I, III, VII et IX*, pp. 262–283.
10. *Karlamagnús saga: Branches I, III, VII et IX*, pp. 296–301.
11. *Fornsögur Suðrlanda*, p. 103, 120–122.
12. See Scheel, “Byzantium – Rome – Denmark – Iceland,” pp. 288–291.
13. *Fornsögur Suðrlanda*, p. 48.
14. *Fornsögr Suðrlanda*, pp. 82–84.
15. See Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 795–798.
16. *Kirialax saga*, pp. 88–89.

17. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIII, pp. 109–111.
18. See Ahrweiler, *Byzance et la mer*; Pryor & Jeffreys, *The Age of the ΔΡΟΜΩΝ*.
19. *Íslenzk fornrit* XXIII, pp. 88, 95.
20. *Íslenzk fornrit* VII, pp. 271–273.
21. *Íslenzk fornrit* VII, pp. 274–285.
22. *Íslenzk fornrit* VII, pp. 285–289.
23. Wortman, “Cultural Metamorphoses of Imperial Myth under Catherine the Great and Nicholas I”, pp. 128–130.
24. Pushkin, “Олегов Щит”.
25. Gamerschlag, “The Making and Un-Making of Sir Walter Scott’s Count Robert of Paris”, p. 107.
26. See Arnheiður Sigurðardóttir, “Um kvæði Gríms Thomsens Halldór Snorrason”, pp. 257–258.
27. Einar Benediktsson, “Væringjar”.
28. Richelson, *Stjörnustríð*, p. 21.



Conclusion: A Special Relationship

The history of the Varangians has several temporal and geographical dimensions. It is a story of a people that emerged out of nowhere in narratives and chronicles of the great powers, then it metamorphosed into another people and, finally, it became a part of a legendary past that still resonates with us today.

The story of the Varangians began in the ninth century, when there were no Varangians, only the Rus. Shortly before 850, the Rus emerge in two different contexts in written sources: as traders from a distant land with connections to both the Roman Empire and the Khazar Khaganate, and as part of an imperial mission visiting the Carolingian emperor. The sudden emergence of the Rus in Greek, Latin, and Arabic sources within such a relatively short period of time is an indication that their visibility was increasing. The activities of the Rus either were growing in scope or becoming more pertinent to the strong and civilized states to the south.

For the narrators of the early Rus, the royal chroniclers and Islamic officials, they were something of an enigma. The Persian postmaster Ibn Khurradadhbih depicts them as a particular tribe among the Slavs who had trade connections to the Roman Empire. According to him, they claimed to be Christian, but his choice of words indicates that this was questionable. From the very outset, the Rus appeared as people that were not who they seemed to be. This picture emerges in even greater force in *Annales Bertiniani*, where the Rus appear at the Carolingian court in Ingelsheim posing as emissaries of the Roman emperor, but turning out to be

something else entirely, part of the notorious Vikings harassing the Carolingian Empire. The earliest written source on the Rus is quite unambiguous in identifying them as Swedes. Thus, the history of the Rus was, from the outset, connected to the grand narrative of Scandinavian state-building in the East.

From the start, discourse concerning the Rus was shaped by a concretion of identities, not only of the Rus but also of the narrators who described them. In the earliest narratives on the Rus they emerge as the “Other”, in stark contrast to “Us”. The nature of the Rus, their customs and their society, form a counterpoint to the narrator’s civilization. In the description of Rus, the fears, hopes, and secret desires of the narrators materialize; their accounts are shaped by their own cultural anxieties, rather than the few things they knew about the Rus.

In the *Annales Bertiniani*, the Rus appear as secret agents who ultimately end up exposed. The main theme of the annals is the appearance of a hated enemy, people from the dreaded nations of the Vikings, from a totally unexpected geographical direction. The Carolingian emperor’s success in exposing the envoys and foiling any undetected plans is the paramount theme of the narrative. The relationship between the Rus and the Roman emperor and the reason for their appearance in Constantinople is not of any interest to this particular narrator.

For the Romans themselves, the coming of the Rus was not an issue of much importance. This can be deduced from the immense surprise of the Patriarch Photios in the face of the Rus attack on Constantinople in 860. According to Ibn Khurradadhbih, the Rus had been trading with the Romans, and, as evidenced by *Annales Bertiniani*, they had been a part of a mission to the Carolingian court, yet this had not resulted in their becoming worthy of any notice by the governing elite in Constantinople, of which Photios had been a distinguished member for decades. The Patriarch’s account is dominated by nature metaphors; the Rus seem to be a force of nature rather than a people with their own interests and strategies. They are the savage “Other”, threatening the civilized Roman people as a punishment for their sins. Ultimately, the story had a happy ending, in Photios’ view, as this bestial nation was pacified through adoption of Christianity. His depiction of the Rus is emblematic of his own fears and desires, his fear of a people untouched by civilization and his desire for the domination of Christianity and the Roman way of life throughout the world.

For the Arab traveler Ibn Fadlan, the Rus lifestyle proved a stark contrast to Arab society, and was characterized in equal measure by freedom and barbarity. Ibn Fadlan was impressed by the wealth of the Rus and their formidable stature but disgusted by their sexual mores and lack of hygiene. In the end, his description of the Rus offers a glimpse into a different society, which probably was an important impetus for composing this travelogue. Ibn Fadlan's interests are primarily those of a trader, and indeed, the relationship between the Rus and the Islamic societies to the south was always predominated by trade.

In the tenth century, a more complex picture of the Rus emerged in Roman sources, in particular in *The History of Leo the Deacon*. The Rus continued to be a threat and there is continued emphasis on their martial and savage nature. Prince Sviatoslav is depicted as an embodiment of Rus virtues and vices, his martial prowess contrasted with his angry and savage appearance. However, the motif of the Rus as incipient Christians also kept appearing in the tenth century in the guise of Princess Helga. The most noteworthy aspect of tenth-century Roman narratives concerning the Rus is actually how little they tell us about their customs, society, and politics. We do not even know if Kiev was a royal residence in this period, as claimed by later sources. The Romans were only interested in the Rus as a possible Christian ally, but also a possible enemy, which could be checked through an alliance with the Pechenegs.

However, the Rus were soon to acquire a new role, already nascent in the tenth century, as a foreign element within the imperial army. The Rus supplied men for the imperial fleet on two expeditions to Crete in the early tenth century, at a time when the use of foreigners in the army of the Roman Empire was not all that common. A more spectacular and long-lasting precedent was created when Prince Vladimir sent auxiliary forces in 989 to Emperor Basil II in return for a marriage alliance, and by the entry of the Rus into the fold of Christian nations. From that point, the Rus were a permanent fixture in the Roman army, but their identity became more problematic as there also existed the principality of the Rus. It was from this duality that the Rus who were in the service of the empire gained a new identity, that of the Varangians.

The earliest sources for the Varangians, composed by people from the Roman and the Islamic worlds, give different meanings to the term. It was used for a group of soldiers who were in the service of the Roman emperor, presumably dominated by Scandinavians. However, it is also used for a people from a particular geographical location, similar to that ascribed to

the Rus in earlier texts. The Varangians therefore had a dual identity in Greek and Arabic texts.

This dual identity is reflected in the only Greek text which mentions two eleventh-century kings of Norway, Olaf and Harald. They are depicted as kings of a country named Varangia in a short description of Harald's career in the service of the Roman emperor. Harald is thus connected to a particular ethnicity, that of the Varangians, rather than depicted as a member of an elite division of the Roman army, known as the Varangian Guard. It was only after Harald's return to his ancestral lands that references to such a unit became more common in sources emanating from the Roman Empire.

The heyday of a Scandinavian "Varangian Guard" in Constantinople did not last long. By the end of the eleventh century the Scandinavian Varangians had, to a large degree, been supplanted by Anglo-Saxons and several other foreign regiments had joined as well. However, this period had become enshrined in the cultural memory of Scandinavians, with important ramifications.

It is noteworthy that the earliest sources on the Rus and the Varangians view them from the point of view of an external observer. The Rus appear as the "Other", an entity that is positioned opposite to the society of the narrator. Thus their primitiveness and savagery are often emphasized, but also their natural virtues which are uncorrupted by the refined culture to which the narrators belonged. The point of view of the Rus and Varangians themselves is nowhere to be found. When the societies that they came from started documenting their own history, they were a part of a remote past, the realm of cultural memory.

In *The Primary Chronicle* and other sources of the medieval Rus, the Varangians held a role which they did not really hold in earlier Greek, Latin, and Arabic sources. They were categorized as the Scandinavian element within the early Rus society. As the Rus had become a predominantly Slavonic people, the Nordic element seemed more and more alien and external to the Rus. This resulted in the legend of the Varangian founders of the Rus state, who were regarded as different from the Rus of the present. Thus, in these sources, Varangian identities were partly defined in contrast to the Rus. However, as the later rulers of Kiev were regarded as the descendants of these Varangians, they were clearly also an important part of the Rus' history. They were an important element of Rus history, but an element that belonged in the past and had evolved into something else.

Thus, the earliest Varangian legend was born which became a part of the foundation myth of later Russian and Ukrainian lands. The Varangians were a part of the history of these countries, yet an obsolete part; they could be viewed as remote ancestors who had more or less disappeared. The Varangians had become externalized, not as the “Other”, but as a part of ancient history which no longer existed.

However, as the Varangians were disappearing from the lands of the Rus, the existence of the Varangian Guard and continued contact between the Roman Empire and the kingdoms of Scandinavia ensured their presence in the twelfth-century Nordic world. However, in the Scandinavian sources, whether written in Old Norse or Latin, there is little mention of the Varangians in the twelfth century. Even if there are reports of individuals staying in Constantinople and serving the emperor, they do not seem to have been known by this appellation.

In the thirteenth century, after the fall of Constantinople into the hands of the Latin crusaders and the severing of direct contact between the Roman Empire and Scandinavia, the Varangians finally made an appearance in Old Norse texts. They appeared in kings’ sagas that dealt with events no longer connected with living memory. King Haraldr was placed in connection to the multitude of Norsemen who had preceded him in travels to Constantinople and were known as the Varangians. In *Morkinskinna* and other thirteenth-century narratives, Haraldr’s adventures are much embellished, but there is also a new emphasis placed on his followers who participated in his exploits in Constantinople. In particular, Icelanders from the western region of that country seem to play a big role in this new narrative.

The kings’ sagas influenced the development of a new genre, the sagas of the Icelanders. As far as can be ascertained, the earliest texts dealing with Icelandic Varangians concentrated on people from the same families and communities as those who earlier had been connected to King Haraldr. However, soon people from other regions were included in the Varangian legend, as they were in other parts of Icelandic history.

Etiological concerns soon gave way to narrative concerns, as the Varangian became a stock figure of the saga literature. A Varangian past was, in itself, a substantiation of a character’s bravery and loyalty, his virtues needed no further confirmation. In contrast, a final career step as a Varangian could be regarded as a suitable remuneration for a noble and virtuous character.

In Old Norse sources, the legend of the Varangian is a part of a larger trend of a positive textual relationship between the Nordic world and the Roman Empire. The figure of the Roman emperor was revered and usually situated above all other monarchs, even the Saxon emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. This is a far remove from the standard Western view of distrust in the “perfidious Greeks”, which is hardly noticeable in Old Norse texts. In particular, there is very little evidence that Scandinavians had clear knowledge of a Great Schism which had split Christianity into a Latin and a Greek world. On the contrary, in Old Norse sources the great apostle of the north, Ólafr Tryggvason, was credited with the Christianization of the Rus, in cooperation with missionaries from Constantinople. One of the chief Icelandic missionaries, Þorvaldr víðförli, was depicted as gaining great secular authority in Rus following his mission in Iceland. There seems to have been little awareness of any differences between Eastern and Western Christianity, or of a split between the Greeks and the Latins.

In medieval Old Norse texts, one finds constant and fairly equivocal reverence for the Roman emperor, who was looked upon as one of the foremost rulers of Christianity. This sentiment had roots in the twelfth century when the way in which Nordic kings and nobles were received in Constantinople held much significance to them. In the far north, however, this perception seems to have persisted into the fourteenth century. In Icelandic works dating from the late fourteenth century, the Roman emperor is still viewed as a Christian authority who could grant pious and worthy Christians a great deal of power in the East.

The legend of the Varangians must inevitably be placed in this context, as a piece of a larger picture of the relationship between the Scandinavians and the Roman Empire. The effects of this special relationship lasted into the late medieval period, where it is manifested in the uniformly flattering picture of the Roman Empire and its rulers in Old Norse texts. The Varangians were a part of Scandinavian identity, a part which was formed through a desire to belong to the world of the Roman Empire. The Varangians were not alienated from Old Norse culture, they were bridge-builders who created a shimmering path towards the most noble empire in Christianity.

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CHAPTER I

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CHAPTER 2

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CHAPTER 6

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CHAPTER 7

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CHAPTER 9

For a comparison of King Eiríkr and King Sigurðr see Karsten Fledelius, “Royal Scandinavian travellers to Byzantium: the vision of Byzantium in Danish and Norwegian historiography of the early thirteenth century—and in the Danish historical drama of the early nineteenth century”, in: *Byzantium—Identity, image, influence*. XIXth International Congress of Byzantine Studies, University of Copenhagen, 18–24 August 1997, Major Papers. Copenhagen: Eventus Publishers, 1997, 212–218. For the later crusades see Erin M. Goeres, “Medieval Self-Fashioning: Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson and Orkneyinga saga”, *Scandinavica* 54.2 (2015): 6–39, and Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, *A Journey to the Promised Land. Crusading Theology in the “Historia de profectione Danorum in Hierosolymam” (c. 1200)*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001.

The main discussion of the question of the relationship between Scandinavian kings and the Roman emperor is in Sverrir Jakobsson, “Emperors and Vassals: Scandinavian kings and the Byzantine emperor”, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 110:3 (2017): 1–24. On the language of the institution of *ligesse* in the Comnenian Period in Byzantium see Jadran Ferluga, “La *ligesse* dans l’empire byzantine”, *Zbornik radova Vizantoloskog Instituta* 7 (1961) 97–123; Ludwig Buisson, *Erobererrecht, Vasallität und byzantinisches Staatsrecht auf dem ersten Kreuzzug*. Berichte aus den Sitzungen der Joachim-Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, Hamburg, 2:7, Hamburg: Joachim Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, 1985. For the concept of “soft power” in connection with the Byzantine Empire see in particular Jonathan Shepard, “Byzantium’s overlapping circles”, in *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21–26 August 2006. I. Plenary papers*, ed. Elizabeth Jeffreys, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 15–55. On traditional Byzantine ideas about the oecumene of Christian kingdoms and the role of the Roman emperor within that community see Franz Dölger, “Die Familie der Könige im Mittelalter”, *Historisches Jahrbuch* 60 (1940): 397–420; cf. Wolfram Brandes, “Die “Familie der Könige” im Mittelalter: Ein Diskussionsbeitrag zur Kritik eines vermeintlichen Erkenntnismodells”, *Rechtsgeschichte / Legal History* 21 (2013): 262–284.

CHAPTER 10

According to Roland Scheel “the decades around 1200 appear to have been a key period in cultural transfer between Byzantium and Scandinavia”, see “Concepts of Cultural Transfer Between Byzantium and the North”, in *Byzantium and the Viking World*, pp. 53–87. This reflects a paradigm shift in the studies of interactions between the Roman Empire and Scandinavia, which is pursued further in the current volume.

On chrysobulls see for instance Franz Dölger, “Die Kaiserurkunde der Byzantiner als Ausdruck ihrer politischen Anschauungen”, *Historische Zeitschrift* 159 (1939): 229–250. On the relationship between the Roman emperors and late twelfth century Scandinavian royals, see, for instance, John H. Lind, “De russiske ægteskaber. Dynasti- og alliancepolitik i 1130’s danske borgerkrig”, *Historisk tidsskrift* 92 (1992): 225–263, and Krijnie N. Ciggaar, “Denmark and Byzantium from 1184 to 1212. Queen Dagmar’s cross, a chrysobull of Alexius III and an ‘ultramarine’ connection”, *Medieval Scandinavia* 13 (2000): 118–143. On artistic connections see also the thorough discussion by Scheel in *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 373–588.

For a discussion on the Northwestern contacts of the Roman emperors see for instance Alexander A. Vasiliev, “Manuel Comnenus and Henry Plantagenet”, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 29:2 (1930): 233–244; François-Louis Ganshof, “Robert le Frison et Alexis Comnène”, *Byzantion* 31:1 (1961): 57–74; Krijnie N. Ciggaar, “Flemish Mercenaries in Byzantium. Their Later History in an Old Norse Miracle”, *Byzantion* 51:1 (1981): 44–74.

On the example of Sigurðr “the Greek”, see two articles in *Byzantium and the Viking Word*, Sverrir Jakobsson, “The Varangian Legend. Testimony from the Old Norse Sources”, pp. 345–362, and Scott Ashley, “Global Worlds, Local Worlds. Connections and Transformations in the Viking Age”, pp. 363–87.

CHAPTER 11

Examples of Icelandic Varangians are discussed in detail by Sigfús Blöndal in *Veringjasaga* and, from a very different perspective, by Roland Scheel in *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, pp. 737–58, and Sverrir Jakobsson, “The Varangian Legend”.

On the Book of Settlements and its development, see for instance Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Sögugerð Landnámabókar. Um íslenska sagnaritun á 12. og 13. öld*. Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar 35, Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001, and Verena Höfig, “A Pre-Modern Nation? Icelanders’ Ethnogenesis and Its Mythical Foundations”, *Scandinavian Studies* 90 (2018): 110–132. On the Sagas of the Icelanders as a genre see Vésteinn Ólason, “Family Sagas”, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 101–118. On the genre of þættir see Ármann Jakobsson, “The Life and Death of the Medieval Icelandic Short Story”, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 112 (2013): 257–91.

On Morkinskinna in particular see Ármann Jakobsson, “King and Subject in Morkinskinna”, *skandinavistik* 28 (1998): 101–17, and Ármann Jakobsson, “En plats i en ny värld: Bilden av riddarsamhället i Morkinskinna”, *Scripta Islandica* 59 (2008): 27–46. The social roles of singletons (einhleypingar), such as Þorkell Þjóstarsson is discussed by Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Fór ek einn saman Einhleypingar á Þjóðveldisöld”. In *Íslenska sögupíngið 28.-31. maí 1997*. Ráðstefnurit I, eds. Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson and Eiríkur K. Björnsson. Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun, 1998, pp. 83–94.

CHAPTER 12

On relics in Constantinople, see Holger A. Klein, “Sacred Relics and Imperial Ceremonies at the Great Palace of Constantinople” in *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft. Frühmittelalterliche Residenzen, Gestalt und Zeremoniell*. Internationales Kolloquium, 3./4. Juni 2004 in Istanbul. BYZAS 5, ed. Franz Alto Bauer, Istanbul: Zero Books, 2006, pp. 79–99. On Scandinavian names of Constantinople and other eastern places the standard work is still Vilhelm Thomsen, *The Relations Between Ancient Russia and Scandinavia and the Origin of the Russian State*, Oxford and London: James Parker and Co, 1877, but for a more recent overview see Jackson, *Eastern Europe in the Icelandic Sagas*, pp. 25–41. For literary motifs related to royal visitors see Fjodor Uspenskij, “Contempt for Byzantine Gold: Common Plot Elements in Rus Chronicles and Scandinavian Sagas”, in *Byzantium and the Viking World*, pp. 337–44.

On legends concerning King Haraldr and his relations with the Roman emperors see the articles by Ciggaar, “Harald Hardrada: His expedition against the Pechenegs”, and Bagge, “Harald Hardråde i Bysants. To

fortellinger, to kulturer”. For a broad discussion of the image of Haraldr see Ármann Jakobsson, *A sense of Belonging. Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity, c. 1220*. The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization 22, Odense, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014, pp. 237–46. On the negative image of Empress Zoe in the Old Norse tradition see Lars Lönnroth, “The man-eating Mama of Miklagard. Empress Zoe in Old Norse saga tradition”, in *Kairos: Studies in Art History and Literature in Honour of Professor Gunilla Åkerström-Hougen*, eds. Elisabeth Piltz and Paul Aström, Jonsered: Paul Aströms förlag, 1998, pp. 37–49.

For further reading of Eiríkur víðförli and his travels, see Rudolf Simek, “Die Quellen der Eiríks saga víðförla”, *Skandinavistik* 14 (1984): 109–114. For the ideological context of this tale see Sverrir Jakobsson, “On the Road to Paradise: ‘Austrvegr’ in the Icelandic Imagination”, in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature—Sagas and the British Isles*. Preprint papers of the 13th international Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6–12 August, 2006, eds. John McKinnell, David Ashurst & Donata Kick, Durham: The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Durham University, 2006, pp. 935–43.

CHAPTER 13

Religious influences on Scandinavia emanating from the East have been a source of much speculation. Per Beskow reached a rather negative conclusion in “Runor och liturgi”, in *Nordens kristnande i europeiskt perspektiv*, Skara: Viktoria Bokförlag, 1994, pp. 16–36, and considered the Byzantine influence on Scandinavia negligible, apart from in Finland. For a more optimistic view see the volumes *Early Christianity on the Way from the Varangians to the Greeks*, and *Från Bysans till Norden. Östliga kyrkoinsfluenser under vikingatid och tidig medeltid*, ed. Henrik Janson, Malmö: Artos, 2005.

Another matter is whether Scandinavians generally regarded the Roman Empire as heretical, in line with the position of the Papacy. Scholarly attitudes towards the “Great Schism” have evolved over the past decades. One of the earliest examples of shifting attitudes is Steven Runciman in *The Eastern Schism. A Study of the Papacy and the Eastern churches during the XIth and XIIth centuries*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955. Runciman claimed that it was ‘impossible to give a precise date for the schism’ and argued that the schism was not a matter of conflicting ecclesiastical traditions, but of mutual dislike between the peoples of Eastern and Western

Christendom 'that arose out of the political events of the eleventh and twelfth centuries'. For a recent overview see Axel Bayer, *Spaltung der Christenheit: Das sogenannte Morgenländische Schisma von 1054*, Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2002. This issue has been discussed in some detail before in Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Schism that never was: Old Norse views on Byzantium and the Rus", *Byzantinoslavica*, 66 (2008): 173–88, and Tatjana N. Jackson, "Rus' and Scandinavia: The Orthodox–Latin Division in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and in Reality", in *Early Christianity on the Way from the Varangians to the Greeks*, pp. 120–32.

On the source value of Eymundar þátr and its congruence with Russian sources, cf. Robert Cook, "Russian History, Icelandic Story, and Byzantine Strategy in Eymundar þátr Hringssonar", *Viator* 17 (1986): 65–89. On the Old Norse Játvarðar saga see in particular articles by Christine Fell, "The Icelandic Saga of Edward the Confessor: Its version of the Anglo-Saxon Emigration to Byzantium", *Anglo-Saxon England* 3 (1974): 179–196, and "A Note on Pálsbók", *Medieval Scandinavia* 6 (1973): 102–108. See also Jonathan Shepard, "Another New England? Anglo-Saxon settlement on the Black Sea", *Byzantine Studies* 1 (1974): 18–39.

CHAPTER 14

On Old Norse romance literature in general, see Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1934. For a more recent overview see Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur. Writing Romance in Late Medieval Iceland*. The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization 21, Odense, University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014. On Kirjalax saga, see in particular Robert Cook, "Kirjalax saga: A Bookish Romance", in *Les Sagas de Chevaliers (Riddarasögur): Actes de la Ve Conférence Internationale sur les Sagas Présentés par Régis Boyer*. Serie Civilisations 10, Toulon. Juillet 1982, pp. 303–26. Konráðs saga and other similar romances are discussed by Marianne E. Kalinke, "The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance", *The Modern Language Review* 78 (1983): 850–61. On Eastern themes in the Romances in general see Marina Mundt, *Zur Adaption orientalischer Bilder in den Fornaldarsögur Nordrlanda. Materialien zu einer neuen Dimension altnordischer Belletristik*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993, and Frederic Amory, "Things Greek and the riddarasögur", *Speculum* 59:3 (1984): 509–523.

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